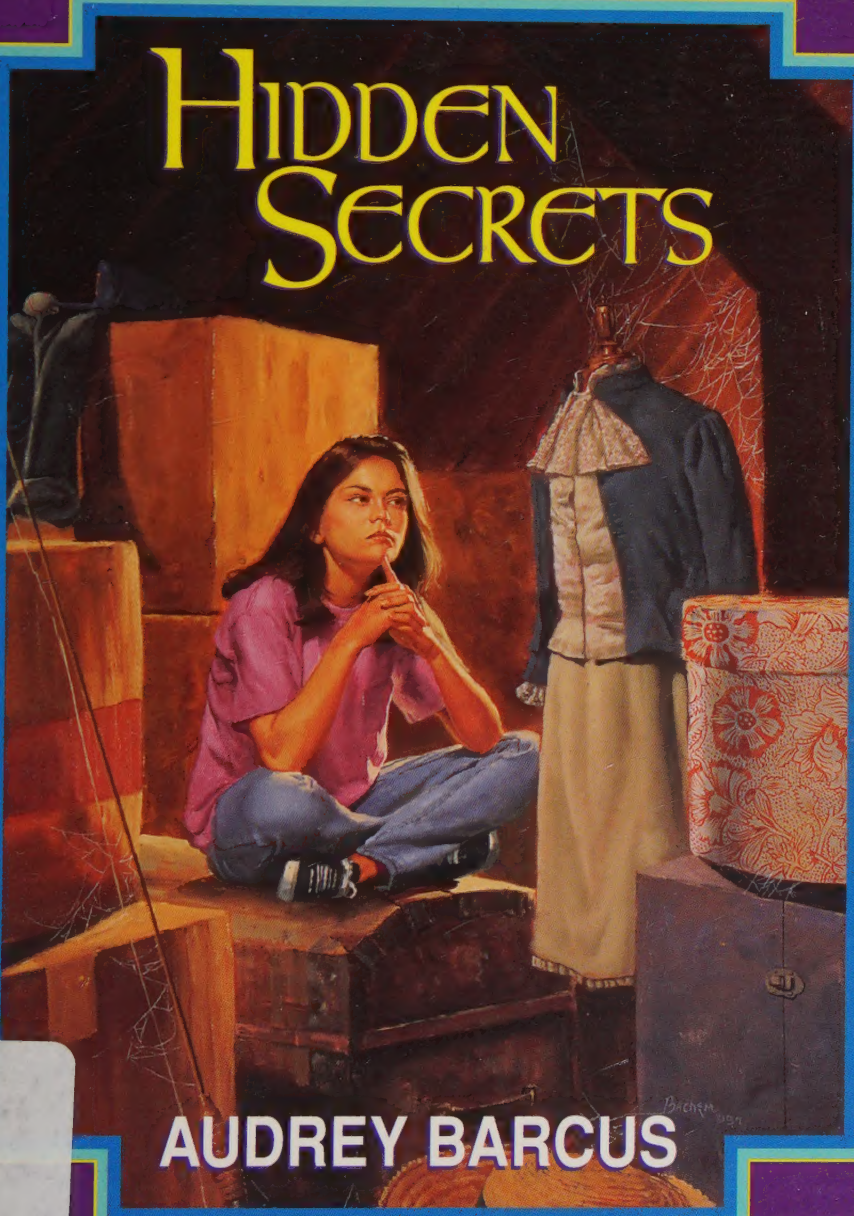
AVON CAMELOT

SOMEONE THINKS ALLIE KNOWS TOO MUCH...
SOMEONE WHO WON'T LET HER GET AWAY...

HIDDEN SECRETS



AUDREY BARCUS

AVON CAMELOT

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Hidden Secrets

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Audrey Barcus

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Hidden Secrets

AUDREY BARCUS

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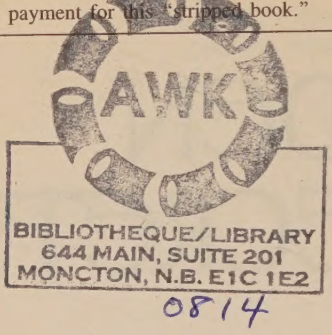

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One

"My mother wouldn't run away, would she?" Allie McKenzie slammed the bedroom door and leaned against it.

Her best friend, Kristi Kennedy, sat cross-legged on Allie's bed. "Is that what the police think?"

"Yes. The cop downstairs said, 'It's possible that Mrs. McKenzie's disappearance is deliberate.' " Allie mimicked the policeman's voice. " 'If that's the case, then she doesn't want to be found.' " She threw herself full length on the bed next to Kristi.

"What did you say to the cop?"

"I told him he was wrong. My dad got mad. But I *know* my mom wouldn't run away."

"Then where is she? She's been missing for five days."

"Something awful must have happened to her, but no one will listen to me." Allie punched the pillow. "The cops think what does she know, a dumb eighth grader. They don't believe me."

"And your dad?"

"He's so upset, he'll believe anything the police tell him."

"What did they say?" Kristi grabbed a brush from Allie's dresser and back-combed her curly red hair.

"That they'd covered all the usual bases in a missing person's case here on Staten Island. They sent her picture to every hospital, clinic, airport, bus station, and train station in the entire New York City area." Allie bit her lip. "Even the morgues."

"How gruesome!"

"They didn't turn up one tiny clue. Nothing."

"What about her car?"

"No sign of it anywhere. The cop said if she'd met with foul play, they probably would have found out by now."

"That's good news. They'll find her soon, Allie. Wait and see."

"They never found the hit-and-run driver who killed my brother."

"Maybe your mother was still upset about Jimmy's death."

"That was five months ago. Why wait till now to run away? She went to pieces when he was killed. So did my father. So did I." Allie rolled over on the bed.

"Maybe she's taking a break and will come back."

"She wouldn't just leave for work in the morning and not show up at night. No way. Not my mother."

"Yeah, she'd at least have left a note."

"She'd look me square in the eye and say so. She wouldn't run away. We made a pact after Jimmy died, my mom and me. We promised to be here for each other."

"The police say anything else?" Kristi rummaged in her purse for a stick of gum, unwrapped it, and popped it in her mouth.

"You're not going to crack that gum, are you?" Allie sat up, her hands around her knees.

Kristi grinned. "I can't help it. What else did the police say?"

"They found out my mother had been going to a shrink. Can you believe that?"

"A psychiatrist?"

"Yeah. A Doctor Diamond in Manhattan. She went once a week during her lunch hour. And she never even told us. She went to see him the day she disappeared."

"Did your dad know?"

"Uh-uh. She never even told him."

"Wow, that's weird."

"Why didn't she talk to me? I'd have been here for her the way she was for me." Allie grabbed the brush from Kristi and combed out her long hair—sleek and dark just like her mother's. Then she shook the brush at her friend. "If I tell you something, will you promise not to tell anyone else?"

"You know I wouldn't." Kristi leaned on her knees.

"If you dare, I'll . . . I'll tell Freddy Vunder that you like him. He's such a nerd, he'd believe me."

Kristi smiled. "Yeah, he would. What's the secret?"

"I never told you, but ever since Jimmy was killed, I get awful nightmares. I wake up screaming. My mom always came in and stayed until I fell asleep again. Sometimes she'd sing silly songs or rub my back."

"I didn't know you had nightmares. Is that why you won't spend the night at my house?"

Allie nodded. "I still need a light on when I go to sleep. My dad said my mom was treating me like a baby. But she let me leave the light on anyway."

"Your mom would."

"Why would she leave me when cheerleading tryouts are coming up? She wanted me to make the squad. She promised to help me do round off backhand springs this weekend."

"Speaking of tryouts, guess who made the JV basketball team at Curtis High School?"

"Who?" Allie was annoyed that Kristi would talk about such trivia right now.

"Shane Schroeder. My sister told me."

"Big deal." She didn't want to admit to Kristi how much it hurt to talk about Shane.

Kristi bit her lip. "I thought you'd want to know. You did go with Shane last year."

"That was last year. Everything's changed.

"I wish I could wave a magic wand and have your mother reappear." Kristi paused. "I wish I could make you laugh again. I miss the old Allie." Her voice broke.

"I'll never be the same again." Allie swallowed down a sob. "I'm scared, Kristi. Really scared."

"Ouch!" Kristi yelled from the foot of the bed.

"What's the matter?" Allie stared at her.

"Something jabbed my funny bone." Kristi rubbed her elbow. Then she reached under the comforter and drew out a book. "Do you always keep books in your bed?"

"I wondered where that book had disappeared to."

"It's overdue at the library." Kristi read the due date. "You'll have a fine."

"I don't care. I'll never read another mystery as long as I live."

"What? This from the Nancy Drew of Staten Island?" Kristi placed her hand over her heart in mock horror.

"Cut it out. I'm not in the mood."

"I'm surprised you're not helping the police look for clues."

Allie drummed her fingers against her cheek.

"What are you plotting?" Kristi asked. "Whenever you start tapping your face like that, something's up."

"You gave me an idea. If the police can't find my mother, maybe I can."

"How are you going to do that?" Kristi frowned.

"Where's the first place you'd look for clues if someone was missing?"

Kristi screwed up her face in thought. "In the missing person's house, I guess. Probably her bedroom."

"Exactly." Allie jumped up. "Come on. We're going sleuthing."

"In your mother's room?"

"Of course. What do you think? The North Pole?" *Sometimes Kristi could be so dense.*

"No need to be cranky."

"Hurry up." Allie pulled Kristi off the bed.

"What if your father sees us?"

"He's still downstairs with the police."

Allie opened her door a crack and listened. She heard the murmur of voices from the living room.

"The coast is clear," she whispered. "Let's go."

Two

THE DOOR TO HER PARENTS' BEDROOM CREAKED open. Allie slipped inside with Kristi hanging on to her arm.

"Stop cracking that gum in my ear." Allie turned on the light.

"Didn't the police search your mother's room?"

"Yeah, but they don't know my mother like I do."

"What are we looking for?"

"Anything suspicious."

"How do I know what looks suspicious?" Kristi muttered.

Allie searched her mother's dressing table. Just a few weeks ago her mother had taught her how to use eye makeup. "It has to look natural to be good, Allie," she'd said. "You want people to notice your eyes, not the makeup." She remembered the feel of her mother's fingers on her eyelids, the smell of her perfume. She dropped a tube of lipstick.

"Shh. Your father will hear us!" Kristi warned.

"Look in my mother's closet."

"I feel funny going through your mother's things."

"Do it." Allie rifled through the dresser drawers.

"Wow! This is a great dress. It would be perfect for the dance next week." Kristi pirouetted in front of the mirror.

"Knock it off, Kristi!" Allie grabbed the dress and went to hang it back in the closet. "Ouch!"

"What's the matter?"

Allie picked up a big metal flashlight from the closet floor. "I stubbed my toe on this."

"Clumsy."

"This isn't ours." She turned the flashlight over. "A label says, Forest Avenue Playground."

"That's suspicious." Kristi popped her gum behind Allie.

"It is. How did it get in my mother's closet?"

"What are you two doing in here?" her father boomed from the doorway.

Allie spun around. She hid the flashlight behind her leg. Kristi backed against the bed so hard she sat down with a thump.

"What's going on?" Her father looked around at the open drawers and closet.

Kristi jumped up. "I was just leaving. Call you later, Allie." She darted out the door.

"What are you looking for, Allie?" Her father closed a few drawers.

She took a deep breath. "Clues."

"Clues? For what?"

"Where Mom is."

Her father sighed. "We all wish we knew that."

"I don't believe the police. Mom wouldn't run away."

Her father loosened his tie. "Allie, sit down." He pointed to the bed.

She hesitated. Ever since she'd started eighth grade, her dad was on her back about something—talking on the phone too much, staying in the band, wearing makeup, boys. She didn't want another lecture.

"I said, sit down." He sounded angry.

Allie scooted back against the headboard. She slipped the flashlight into the wide sleeve of her sweater while her father pulled up the chair from the dressing table.

"First of all, you need to go back to school tomorrow. You can't stay home waiting for your mother to show up. We can't count on that."

"She's coming back, Dad."

Her father ran his fingers through his brown hair. She had always thought he was handsome, but today he looked like he sagged. This was rough on him too.

"The police could be right, Allie. Your mother may have left because she wanted to."

"How can you say that? You know Mom. She wouldn't do that." She was spitting mad.

"Your mother and I weren't getting along. You heard us arguing. Ever since Jimmy died, nothing's been right in this house. You know that."

"Dad, don't!" Allie ran to the window, her back to her father.

"I don't want to hurt you, honey." She heard the sadness in his voice. "But coping with your brother's death has been the hardest thing any of us have had to do, especially your mother. I'm beginning to agree with the police. I think she left because she couldn't handle it anymore. It may be a long time before she gets in touch with us."

Allie spun around. "*No!*" she screamed at her father. "I don't care what you say. Or what the police say. Mom wouldn't leave me. You probably hope she doesn't come back. All you cared about was Jimmy. You're sorry he's the one who's dead and I'm alive!"

She burst into sobs and ran from the room to her bedroom.

"Allie!" her father called, but she slammed her door.

She sobbed into her pillow until her chest hurt. She'd finally said it. For five months she couldn't look her father in the eye for fear she'd see disappointment that she was the one who was alive, not Jimmy.

Jimmy had been Dad's favorite. They'd gone to Mets and Giants games. They were always throwing footballs and baseballs around outside and talking about fishing trips they were going to take. They hardly ever invited her.

A knock sounded on the door. "Go away!"

"Allie, it's Mrs. Brumbaugh."

Great. Old nosybody herself. "I don't feel good," she called to the old lady who lived next door.

"I've got something for you."

She sat up. Might as well get it over with. "Okay. Come on in."

Mrs. Brumbaugh poked her white head around the door. "Howdy. Your father told me to come on up. I've got a plate of warm brownies for you. Your mother can eat a whole plate of these by herself."

"Thanks. Just put them on my dresser." Mrs. Brumbaugh thought food was the answer to every problem. When Allie had broken her leg in sixth grade, the old lady had come over every day with a plate or bowl of something.

"You're looking pale, Allie. Fresh air would do you a world of good." She plunked the brownies down, then straightened out the blue gingham apron that covered her green checked housedress. She always wore an apron. She made them herself and gave them away as gifts, too. Whenever Mrs. Brumbaugh came over for dinner, Mrs. McKenzie made Allie wear one of the ones she'd given her.

Allie pointed to the rain trickling down the window. "It's raining out."

"It's only a drizzle. Nothing like a good walk in the rain to clear the brain, I always said to my children. Your mother's a great one for walks in the rain, you know."

Allie swallowed. "I know. And thank you, Mrs. B."

The old lady shook her head. "The brownies are nothing. I wish I could do more."

"Not for the brownies."

"Oh?" She opened her faded blue eyes wide.

"For not talking about my mother in the past tense. Like she's dead or never coming back—the way everyone else does."

Mrs. Brumbaugh sat down on the edge of the bed. "If I know your mother, she'll move heaven and earth to get back to you. Don't you give up on your mom. I feel it in my old bones that she's alive. Peggy McKenzie's a fighter. And so are you. You're the spitting image of your mother in more ways than one." Whenever the old lady got excited, her false teeth wobbled like crazy.

Allie said nothing, afraid she might cry.

Mrs. Brumbaugh struggled up from the bed. She had something wrong with her feet. It made her hobble like

a bowlegged cowboy. "I'd best be going. Eat those brownies. And if you need anything, give me a holler."

The only thing Allie needed or wanted was her mother. But she said, "Thank you."

After the old lady left, the room seemed too quiet. Even the rain drizzled down without a sound. It trickled on the window like tiny teardrops.

Everything reminded her of her mother. Her mother had hung the green paisley wallpaper, bought the matching comforter, hung the ruffly yellow curtains, and refinished the big dresser and matching desk.

Allie unwrapped the brownies. The smell of warm brownies made her want to cry. On rainy days she and her mother baked chocolate chip cookies or brownies, and the smell of them would fill the house, cozy and warm.

Why did Kristi have to mention Shane? She didn't want to think about him either. She rolled over on the bed. Her hip hit something hard. The flashlight. She carried it to the window where the light was better. About a foot long, heavy, black metal, and a strip of adhesive on the handle labeled FOREST AVENUE PLAYGROUND.

How did it get in her mother's closet? It couldn't have been there when the police searched the bedroom. They would have noticed it and asked her father about it.

Allie sat and ran her fingers over the rough surface of the flashlight until it grew dark outside.

Tomorrow, she'd have to go to school. But tomorrow she was also going to look for her mother.

Three

THE NEXT MORNING SHE MET KRISTI AT THE CORner of Harvest Avenue. Allie's backpack felt like a ton of bricks on her shoulders.

"I wish I could run away right now." Allie kicked at a rock on the sidewalk. "What if the kids at school look at me weird?"

"Why? It's not your fault your mother's missing."

"But it's been in the *Staten Island Advance* for days. And you said everyone was talking about it."

"I'll stick by you all day."

"Thanks, Kristi.

At the front gate of Susan Wagner Junior High, Kristi nudged Allie. "Don't look now, but guess who's coming."

Allie sucked in her breath. Shane Schroeder was headed their way. It was too late to turn around. He'd already seen them.

"Hi, Kristi." He stuck his hands in his jeans pockets. "Hi, Allie."

"Hi," Kristi almost sang.

Allie could only stare at him. He had the most gor-

geous blue eyes with long dark lashes. And a smile that took her breath away. She couldn't believe how tall he'd gotten.

"What's the matter?" Shane frowned at Allie. "Why are you staring at me?" He smoothed his brown hair.

"You wish," she said, and then instantly regretted it. "What are you doing here? Did they kick you out of high school?" She wanted to bite her tongue off.

"Still a junior high brat, aren't you? For your information, I brought my sister her lunch." Shane pushed past them and out the gate.

Allie groaned. "Why did I act like such a jerk?"

Kristi shook her head. "I don't get it. Why do you treat him like that? And why won't you talk about what happened between you two? He's a hunk. How do I look? I bet my hair looks like crud."

Allie hit the gate with her fist. "Who cares? Let's go to class and get this day over with."

They walked into the band room just before the bell rang. Everyone stared at Allie. Some of them whispered. She wished she were invisible.

"Darn it," Kristi muttered. "He's here."

"Rothenburg's never absent. He lives to torture kids."

She slid into the second seat in the saxophone section. Kristi was first chair flute.

Mr. Rothenburg pounded on the podium with his directing wand. "Time's a-wasting. Settle down, ladies and gentlemen. We need to oil those squeaks and grind those squawks."

Allie rolled her eyes at Kristi. Rottenburger, as the kids called him, said the same thing every day. He'd probably been saying it for twenty years.

She couldn't concentrate on the music. She'd never make first chair at this rate. But she didn't care anymore. Being a band nerd was the pits. If it hadn't been for her father, she'd have dropped out long ago.

At lunch she and Kristi sat by themselves on the soccer field away from the in crowd by the basketball courts.

"Thanks for sticking by me, Kristi."

"You're my best friend. I'd rather be with you."

Allie chewed her peanut butter sandwich. "Most of the kids act like I've got lice or something. They walk away or won't look at me."

"They just don't know what to say."

She threw her crumpled up lunch bag against the fence. "Kristi, do you think my mother's coming back?"

Kristi sighed. "I don't know, Allie. Don't keep asking me that."

"This is different from when Jimmy died. We knew he'd never come back. But what do you do when someone's disappeared?" Allie closed her eyes. "How can I go to school every day when I don't know where my mother is!"

She jumped up and ran across the field, sobs choking her. She heard Kristi running after her.

She stopped at the fence and banged her head against it hard. The pain jolted her.

"Allie, don't." Kristi pulled her away.

"If my mother doesn't come back, I won't make it. I'll kill myself. I will." She stood absolutely still, afraid of the words she'd spoken.

Kristi looked white as a ghost. "Don't say that." Her voice broke. "Don't ever say that."

"Then tell me how I can go on living as if nothing has changed?"

Kristi put her hands on her hips. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Yesterday you said you would search for your mother. Have you changed your mind?"

She wanted to slap Kristi's face. Instead she turned and scanned the playing field.

"Well?" Kristi challenged.

"I've got to get out of here. Can I climb over this fence?" Allie shook the chain-link fence to test its strength.

"You can't do that. You'll get caught!"

"I have to. My mom may be trapped somewhere. Or maybe she has amnesia. Maybe someone kidnapped her. Maybe she witnessed a murder. Maybe some weirdo grabbed her and is holding her prisoner."

"Allie!"

"Don't you listen to the news? Bad things happen to nice people. Look what happened to Jimmy. The hit-and-run driver who killed him never even stopped." Allie kicked the fence. "You're right. I have to find her. No one else cares. Not even my father. So, help me over the fence."

"What will I tell the principal if he asks for you?"

"Tell him I disappeared. It runs in the family."

"Where are you going?"

"To Manhattan to find Doctor Diamond, the shrink. If that doesn't turn up anything, I'll go to the Forest Avenue Playground."

"Did you ask your father about the flashlight we found in your mother's closet?"

"Not yet. Come on, give me a boost over the fence."

Allie stepped into Kristi's linked hands and sprang

for the top of the fence. She stuck the toes of her shoes into the fence and climbed up and over it. She landed on her feet on the sidewalk.

"Run," Kristi urged. "Good luck. I'll call you later."

Allie raced down the street, not even looking back over her shoulder.

Four

She ran all the way home. Was there really a truant officer looking for kids who ditched school? If there was, Allie crossed her fingers he wasn't in the West Brighton part of Staten Island today. She had never ditched one class in her whole life.

Mrs. Brumbaugh was out front raking her lawn when Allie came racing down Bosworth Street. Great, just great! Mrs. Nosybody herself.

"Home early today, aren't you?" Mrs. Brumbaugh leaned across the white picket fence that separated their yards. Her white hair looked like a wild bird's nest.

"We only had half a day." The lie slipped out easily.

"Have you had lunch?"

"Yeah. I've got a doctor's appointment."

Allie ran up the front steps and inside the house. From her secret hiding place in her bedroom, she drew out a ten-dollar bill and some change and shoved them in her jeans pocket. Then she rushed from the house for the bus stop.

Usually she avoided North Burgher Avenue where Jimmy had been hit, but today she was in a hurry, and

this was the shortest route. Jimmy'd always been in a hurry. Whenever they'd been going somewhere and she was still doing her hair, he'd shout up the stairs, "Come on, Allie, get a move on! You look beautiful already." Allie's breath caught in her throat. She remembered how he'd bragged to his friends in the sixth grade that his sister was the prettiest girl in junior high.

At the corner of North Burgher and Forest Avenue, she caught the bus for Saint George and the Ferry. She scrunched down in her seat hoping no one would notice a girl who should be in school.

She made the two o'clock ferry, racing through the turnstiles just in time. At the snack bar, she bought a fat pretzel and a Coke. She didn't dare look at the Statue of Liberty. Whenever she and her mom had ridden the ferry they'd told the same dumb joke about Miss Liberty getting her feet wet. Her mom would laugh and laugh.

As soon as the ferry bumped into the pier, Allie raced off the gangplank, out of the ferry terminal, and across the network of streets to South Street. Then she slowed down. She didn't want the bums who hung out around the docks and parks to notice her. If you watched, you could even see creeps buying drugs.

She'd never been here alone before. When a dirty vagrant looked like he wanted to stop her, Allie ran, her heart hammering, all the way to Wall Street.

Her mother worked at 120 Wall Street near the East River. Every summer vacation she and Jimmy would take turns going to work with their mother for a day. They'd lunch in one of the restaurants in the narrow streets near Wall Street and go to the South Street Seaport Museum.

At the eighteenth floor, Allie shot out of the elevator.

She crossed her fingers that Irene Iaconne wasn't home sick or ditching work.

She breathed a sigh of relief when she saw her mother's friend at the receptionist's desk of the sugar company where her mother worked. Her dark head was bent over some papers, her owl glasses on her nose.

Irene looked up from her work. "Allie! What are you doing here? Has your mom come back?"

Allie shook her head, afraid she might cry. It felt so good to see someone who cared about her mother.

Irene came around the desk, putting an arm around Allie's shoulder. "It's my break. Let's go to the lounge to talk."

Allie followed her down the corridor to the lounge. They sat on a couch by the window. Irene lit a cigarette and blew smoke to the ceiling.

"I thought you quit smoking, Irene."

"I did. But I started again five days ago." She made a face.

"I know what you mean," Allie said. "I've done some things the last few days I never thought I'd do either."

"It's awful, isn't it?" Irene had tears in her eyes.

Allie nodded. Then she squared her shoulders. "But I'm mad, too! Because everyone believes my mother ran away, and I know she didn't."

Irene nodded. "That's what I find hardest to understand. She was crazy about you, kid. You meant the world to her, especially after . . . I mean . . ."

"You mean since Jimmy died."

Irene nodded.

"You know, Irene, I'm sick of hearing and saying

that. It's like B.C. and A.D. at our house—before Jimmy and after Jimmy.'' Allie's voice broke.

''I know. Life doesn't stop just because someone dies,'' Irene said.

''You don't know the half of it! Jimmy's room is locked up like a shrine. Nothing's been touched since the day he left it. My dad acts like he's in a daze. Mostly he's never even home. When he was, he and mom were arguing and yelling.''

Irene handed her a tissue. ''Your mom was very unhappy, especially with your dad. You kept her sane. She loves you so much.''

Irene stubbed out her cigarette. ''I don't know if I should tell you this, Allie, but maybe it will help. Your mother was thinking of divorcing your father.''

''What?'' Allie felt like the floor was caving in under her. ''You're making that up.''

Irene shook her head. ''She didn't see any other way out. Your father was so torn up by Jimmy's death, he started taking it out on your mom.''

''What do you mean?'' Allie whispered.

''A couple of times he came close to hitting her.''

''No! He wouldn't do that.''

''Your mother was afraid he might, someday.''

''Are you saying she ran away because of that?''

Irene touched Allie's knee. ''It's possible. When she didn't come in to work and the police came asking questions, that's what I thought happened.''

''But you said she loved *me!*''

''She does. But sometimes a woman can only take so much. Maybe she just needs time away. I think she'll come back when she sorts things out in her mind.''

Allie shook her head.

"I wish I could tell you what you wanted to hear."

Allie lifted her chin. "There is something you can tell me. Did you know that my mom went to see Doctor Diamond, a shrink?"

"Yes. She went every Thursday during her lunch hour. He helped her through the rough times."

"Where's his office?"

"On William Street. Why?"

"I want to talk to him."

"For yourself? Or about your mother?"

Allie hesitated. "Both. Can you give me his address?"

"It's in the Rolodex on your mom's desk."

As they walked down the corridor, Allie asked if her mother acted differently the day she disappeared.

"I've racked my brain to remember, Allie, but, honestly, I didn't notice anything different about her. I was shocked when they said she was missing. I figured she'd have told me if was leaving your father."

"Me too." Allie smiled. "The police said she saw Doctor Diamond last Thursday."

"Yes. She left here at noon, but she didn't come back here afterward."

"She called, right?"

"At twelve forty-five. She talked to Betty, the woman who fills in for me at lunch. According to her, your mother said she was taking the afternoon off and to charge it to her vacation. Your mother had never done that. I was afraid she was sick or something. I called your house a couple of times, but no one answered."

Irene wrote down the address and handed it to Allie.

"Thanks, Irene. Thanks for everything."

Irene hugged her. "If you need to talk, give me a call. Your mother will come back, Allie. Just give her time."

Allie walked away to the elevator. Irene was wrong. Her mother didn't have time. She had to find her before it was too late. Her stomach churned on the ride down to the first floor. What Irene said about her father couldn't be true. He would never hit her mother. Would he?

"*No!*" Allie shouted at Wall Street. People turned to stare. She ran as fast as she could. Dr. Diamond had to help her. He had to have some answers!

Five

Allie found Dr. Diamond's office on William Street.

"Do you have an appointment?" the receptionist asked Allie.

"No, but I need to talk to Doctor Diamond about my mother. It's very important."

"Doctor Diamond doesn't see anyone without an appointment."

Allie swallowed her anger. "This is an emergency. My mother, Peggy McKenzie, is his patient, and something awful has happened to her." Allie tottered and grabbed the edge of the desk.

"You all right, kid?"

Allie closed her eyes. "I hope so."

"I tell you what. Sit down, and when the doctor's finished with his patient, I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you." Allie sat on a plastic chair and leaned her head against the wall. She tried counting the ceiling tiles to pass the time. Finally, the doctor's door opened. A tall woman came out and fussed about making another appointment.

Allie coughed.

The receptionist tapped on the doctor's door with long red fingernails before she entered. In a minute she came back. "He said he'd see you, but make it quick. The doctor's a busy man."

The doctor, bald with a chubby face, sat behind a big desk. He removed his glasses and pointed to a chair where Allie could sit.

"Hello, Allie. You look like your mother—the same dark hair and pretty brown eyes." He smiled, kind of like a chipmunk but nice. "How can I help you?"

"The police told you my mother's disappeared?"

"Yes, they did."

"Everyone thinks she's run away. I don't. Do you?"

He raised his eyebrows. "She didn't reveal any such intention to me, if that's what you're asking."

"Do you think she would have run away?"

Dr. Diamond put on his glasses. "I was your mother's doctor, her counselor. I consider the confidentiality between a patient and her doctor sacred. I could never break that trust and reveal anything she told me. Do you understand?"

"Do you understand what it's like to have everyone tell me my mother ran away when I know she didn't?"

"You were very important to your mother."

"I know that! What I need to know is where she is."

"Have the police uncovered anything?"

"No. They think she's a runaway mother." Allie leaned her arms on the desk. "You were the last person to see her before she disappeared into thin air. She called her office at twelve forty-five. When was her appointment over?"

''Her appointment was from twelve fifteen to twelve forty-five.''

''I bet she used your secretary's phone. Did she?''

Dr. Diamond sighed but reached for the intercom button. ''Gina, come in here, please.''

She walked in, carrying a pen and pad.

''Gina, did Mrs. McKenzie use your phone last Thursday after her appointment?''

Gina tapped the pencil on her chin. ''Yeah, she did, come to think of it. Said she needed to call her office. Mrs. Wunderlich came in for her appointment then, so I didn't hear what she said.''

''Thanks, Gina.'' The doctor nodded, indicating that she could leave.

Allie waited until the door closed. ''Something made my mother change her mind about going back to work. She never did that. So I figured it had to be something important. I also figured it had to be something she talked to you about.''

The doctor waited, his hands steepled under his chin.

''My brother died five months ago and now my mother's gone.'' Allie's voice shook. ''I couldn't stand it if she didn't come back. Please help me. You don't have to give away anything secret. Just tell me what she talked about that day. Maybe it will give me a clue about where she is. Please?''

He stroked his jaw. ''I'll tell you as much as I feel I can. No more. Okay?''

Allie exhaled, nodding.

''Your mother was dealing with your brother's death, getting stronger every week. Last Thursday, she decided it was time to clean out his room.''

Allie sucked in her breath. ''She did?''

"She hoped it would be a healing process, so she could go on from there."

"She kept his room locked," Allie whispered.

He nodded.

"Why didn't she tell me? We could have done it together."

"Some things we need to face alone."

Allie hit her fist into her hand. "I bet that's what she did instead of going back to work. She's like that. She acts on the spur of the moment. My dad says she's impulsive."

"How is your father doing?"

"Was my mother afraid of my father?" she asked.

The doctor checked his watch. "No more, Allie. Besides, I have to leave."

Allie jumped up. "Thanks, Doctor. You've helped a lot. My mother was right in coming to you for help."

He shook her hand. "I hope you find your mother."

Allie ran all the way to the ferry. She caught the five o'clock boat. Commuters streamed down the aisles. Most of the seats were taken. She was too tense to sit anyway. She stood outside, staring into the dirty water.

The wind blew cold and raw for April. Her insides felt as choppy as the water. She wondered how her mother had felt when she rushed home to clean out Jimmy's room.

Allie was scared. Maybe her mother felt strong enough to see Jimmy's things, but Allie didn't know if she could handle it. She couldn't even deal with what had happened with Shane. Dr. Diamond said some things needed to be faced alone. And Allie had never felt so alone.

Six

IT WAS DARK BY THE TIME SHE RETURNED HOME. For once she would have welcomed Mrs. Brumbaugh in the front yard. The dark house seemed spooky. She turned on every light, even though her father would be upset that she was wasting electricity.

He would be home soon. She raced up the stairs. In front of Jimmy's room, she stopped. "I can't," she whispered in the empty hallway.

She had to. Her hand turned the doorknob. Someone had unlocked it. Her mother *had* been here. She pushed the door open. She snaked her hand around and found the light switch on the wall.

She walked into the room like someone stepping into ice-cold water. On the floor by Jimmy's bed lay his pajamas, just as if he'd stepped out of them. His baseball glove, bat, and cleats were jammed into the corner where he always threw them.

The pretzel and Coke she'd eaten earlier surged into her throat. She wanted to run. *Jimmy. Oh, Jimmy, I miss you. You were the best brother a girl could have. Everyone loved you. You were true blue, Jimmy. Why did you have to die?*

She wiped her face on her sleeve. *Stop it.* She couldn't fall apart. She had to think of her mother.

Her mother had piled some of Jimmy's clothes on the dresser. On the floor by the closet boxes lay strewn about. One of the boxes was packed with games from his closet shelf. Allie smiled. Jimmy'd loved to play Risk.

She sank to the floor by the boxes. Her mother had been in the middle of cleaning out Jimmy's closet. A pair of tennis shoes still stood on the floor, and shirts still hung from the rod. Why had she stopped? It wasn't like her mother to leave things messy.

It looked like she just up and left in the middle of everything. Maybe she couldn't handle going through Jimmy's things. Maybe she had run out.

Allie walked around the room, stopping at Jimmy's desk. His diary lay open, facedown. Jimmy wouldn't have left his diary like that. He always kept it hidden in the Monopoly game. She had found it once when she and Kristi had wanted to play Monopoly. She knew all Jimmy's hiding places.

But she'd never read his diary. That would be like peeking into someone's private thoughts. She knew she wouldn't want anyone looking inside her head.

Her mother must have found the diary in the games. Allie picked up the brown leather diary and turned it over. It lay open in her hand. A page had been torn out. She checked the date. Tuesday, the day before Jimmy had been killed! That was the page that was missing.

Jimmy wouldn't have done that. He was a real freak about books. Even when he was little, he never scribbled in them.

It had to be her mother. But why? What had Jimmy

written that made her tear the page out like that? The edges were all ragged like she'd torn it in a hurry.

Allie sat on the edge of Jimmy's bed. She flipped through the pages of the diary. On Monday he'd written:

Should you beef on a friend? Suppose it was something bad? I'll ask him tomorrow about R. M.

Jimmy never beefed on anyone. He hadn't tattled about the times she'd stopped at the candy store with her friends and was late coming home from school. Allie swallowed hard. If only he had told on her, he'd . . .

Stop it. Concentrate on Mom.

Whatever Jimmy had written must have been real important for her mother to have torn it out. Maybe he wrote the name of a friend he wanted to tell on or what the "something bad" was. Who or what was R. M.? Whatever it was must have made her mother bolt from the room in one heck of a hurry.

Allie tapped the diary against her lips. Could Jimmy have left any other clues? She skimmed through the diary but found nothing else important. She searched through his desk, but all she found were his mementos and toys and junk.

Allie snapped her fingers. His secret hiding place. Once she made Jimmy tell her where he kept his money, in exchange for half her Halloween candy. Jimmy was a candy freak.

She ran to the corner where Jimmy had tossed his baseball stuff. She pulled them away from the wall. Then she dropped to her knees and ran her hand along the wood floor until she found the uneven edge of the board.

With her fingers, she pried the board up. In the cavity un-

derneath lay Jimmy's old tin chest. Her hands shook as she lifted it out. Cradling it like a baby, she carried it to the bed.

Inside, stacks of baseball cards lay bound with rubber bands. She pulled them out. On the bottom lay a small plastic bag half full of tiny green leaves.

Allie dropped it like a hot potato. She knew enough about drugs to know marijuana when she saw it.

She shook her head. Jimmy would never have done drugs. He had only been in the sixth grade when he died. If Jimmy had been into drugs, she'd have known. Besides, Jimmy was as straight as they come. Straight as an arrow, her mother always said.

Plus, they'd made a pact that if either of them tried drugs they would tell the other and not keep it secret.

Could this marijuana be the "something bad" he'd written about in his diary?

It would kill her father if she showed him the drug. The police were out, too. They would see the drug as another reason why her mother had run away.

She'd have to find the friend who Jimmy was going to beef on. She'd start with his friends from the neighborhood. One of them would know about the drugs. At least she hoped so.

6:45—Her father would be home any minute. Allie shoved the plastic bag in her pocket and ran to her room. She grabbed her jacket and raced down the stairs. In the kitchen she wrote a note to her father:

Kristi's mom invited me for dinner. I did all my homework. I'll be home by 9:00. Mrs. Kennedy will drive me home. School was okay today.

Allie

As she ripped the paper from the pad, headlights lit up the driveway. Her father. She propped the note on the kitchen table, and tiptoed to the back door.

She waited while her father rang the front doorbell twice. When she heard the jingling of his keys in the lock, she slid open the back door.

"Allie! I'm home!" he called. She slipped out the door and into the night.

Seven

Allie crouched behind the door to the garage until her heart stopped hammering. In the lighted kitchen she saw her father pulling food from the refrigerator. She should at least have made him dinner.

Too late now. She looked for the pocket door, climbed over it and into Mrs. Strandtough's backyard and out to the sidewalk. Then she raced down the street to Bennett Avenue.

Once she was around the corner, Allie stopped. She sat on the curb between two parked cars, deciding which of Emmy's friends to question. They'd probably think she was crazy, knocking on their doors to talk about her dead brother. Let them. She had to find her mother.

She decided to start with Eric Jensen, Jimmy's best friend. Eric lived on Harvest Avenue in a gray two-story house. Mrs. Jensen opened the door.

"Allie. Come in. Is everything okay?" Mrs. Jensen held a dish towel in her hand.

"Yes, fine. Could I talk to Eric?"

"Eric?" She frowned. Me she wasn't sure she liked a junior high girl talking to her sixth grader.

[illegible] Allie blurted out in a panic.

"Oh, I'll get him. He knows how."

She pointed to the edge of the living room couch where Eric Jensen pulled up the seam for him and then disappeared into the kitchen.

When Eric came down the stairs, Allie was surprised how tall he'd grown since November. Would Jimmy grow taller, too?

"Hey, Allie," Eric lifted a hand in greeting. "What's up?"

"Do you still collect baseball cards?" she asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"I was wondering if you'd want some of Jimmy's." Eric looked at the floor. "Cool, you don't need to—"

"Jimmy would have liked it."

"Thanks." Eric mumbled, clearly uncomfortable. "You and Jimmy were good friends, right?"

Eric nodded.

"If something was bothering him, he would have told you, right?"

"Probably."

"Did Jimmy ever do drugs?"

Eric's head jerked up. "Jimmy do drugs? No way!"

"Some of his friends were doing drugs. Do you know why?"

Eric stared at her. "Did Jimmy use?"

"No. But I need to find out today, and he wrote about selling to a friend who was into something bad."

Eric exhaled up to the forehead. "You know, Jimmy was taking drugs that just relieve . . . pain before . . ."

"He died." Allie knew how he felt.

"I remember now. He was at school and he asked

if it was okay for a friend to tell on a friend, if the friend would get hurt by what he was doing. When I pumped him about it, he just clammed up.''

''Who did you think he meant?''

''No idea. But I remember he said he was going to talk to some guy after school. Something about checking out if it was true or not before he told anyone.''

''Do you know what day that was?''

''Jeez. That was a long time ago. And then Jimmy, you know, died, and it didn't seem important.''

''Was it the day he died?'' She held her breath.

''Maybe. Why? What does it matter?''

''Just wondering.'' Allie jumped up. ''If you want the baseball cards, come by after school some afternoon.''

''Yeah, maybe. Thanks.''

Eric didn't walk her to the door. He stood in the middle of the living room, as if he was thinking about Jimmy. She could tell it hurt a lot.

Outside, she shivered even in her jacket. She scratched Eric's name off the list in her head. His surprise at her drug question seemed real.

She ran the three blocks to Darrel Kaskey's house. No one was home. A dog barked inside, sounding lonely. Allie fingered the smooth plastic of the bag in her pocket.

Steve Ingino lived across from the Staten Island Zoo. His mother blocked the doorway like a football player.

''Steven has homework to do. What do you want?''

''My brother borrowed some money from Steve, and I'm returning it. Could I give it to him?''

''Well . . . I guess so.'' The woman left Allie standing on the front porch and went to yell for Steve.

Steve looked surprised to see her. He scratched his head till his hair stood on end.

She pulled the plastic bag from her pocket. "I found this in my brother's stuff. He said it was yours."

He wrinkled up his face. "What is it? I never had anything like that."

"It's marijuana. Jimmy said you used it."

He jerked back like she'd socked him. "What? He's crazy. I don't smoke pot!"

Allie believed him. He didn't look guilty, just scared to death his mother would hear her.

"Sorry. Wrong Steve, I guess. Thanks anyway." She ran down the front steps, shoving the plastic bag in her jacket pocket.

This was getting her nowhere. But she was probably already in trouble with her dad, so she might as well finish the list.

Jason Densmore lived a few blocks from the zoo. Rain started coming down in a fine mist. She'd probably get a sore throat if she got wet. She always did. And her mom wasn't here to take care of her.

She sighed and rang Jason's front doorbell. Jason answered the door. He frowned when he saw Allie.

"Hey, you're Jimmy McKenzie's sister. What do you want?" The way he said that, and the way he quickly shut the door behind him and came out to the porch, made Allie's pulse beat faster. She was real good at reading people.

"I came to return something of yours my brother had."

Jason flipped back his long blond bangs that fell down his forehead. "Yeah? What?"

She drew the plastic bag from her pocket. "This."

Jason looked back at his house and shoved his hands into his pockets. "How do you know it's mine?"

"Jimmy told me."

"Big mouth jerk," he muttered.

"Excuse me?" Allie raised her voice.

"Forget it. What else did he say?" He sounded worried.

"He was going to tell on you, wasn't he?" she said on a hunch.

Jason narrowed his eyes. "You're just guessing."

"No. He wrote it in his diary. He knew you were doing drugs, didn't he?"

"Get lost." He turned to go in the house.

"Fine. Then I'll talk to your parents."

He let out an angry breath. "What do you want? A confession? Yes, I smoke pot once in a while? Is that what you want me to say?"

"Who was my brother going to talk to the day he was killed?"

Jason sucked in his breath. Then he tried to act cool. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. Who is R. M.?"

Jason backed away. He was no longer the cool kid trying to act tough. Now he looked like a scared little sixth grader.

Allie moved closer. "Who is R. M.? Did he run my brother over?"

She didn't know who was more scared after she'd said that, Jason or her. He stood there panting like he'd been running the mile in a minute.

Jason broke the spell. He whirled and grabbed the doorknob. "You're crazy! Get out of here before I call the police."

The screech of tires and the squeal of brakes in the driveway made them both turn. A guy jumped out of the car and ran up the steps to where they stood.

"Hey, Jason. What's happening?" The guy stared at Allie. "Who's the cute chick?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jason shake his head ever so slightly at her. If he thought she would protect him, he was nuts.

"She's just leaving," Jason said.

"My brother has no manners. I'm Tim Callahan, Jason's brother." He smiled in a way that made her uncomfortable.

"Stepbrother," Jason corrected.

"What's your name, kid?" Tim was tall, blond, and wore lots of gold chains around his neck.

"Allie."

"Be kind to my brother, Allie. He's a jerk with girls." He laughed and reached around Jason to open the front door.

Jason flipped him off as Tim went in the house. Then he shook his fist at Allie. "Get out of here before I punch your lights out." He slammed inside the house.

Allie started to cry. She sank to the bottom step and buried her face in her arms. She cried for Jimmy. For her mother. For her father who waited at home, hurting and alone. She had to talk to him. Maybe Jason was right. Maybe she was crazy.

She raced down the sidewalk. At the corner, she barreled head-on into someone coming in the opposite direction.

A strong hand grabbed and steadied her. "Whoa! Watch where you're going!"

She looked up at a handsome guy with wavy brown hair. "Shane," she whispered.

"What are you doing here? It's late—and it's raining."

"I'm going home," she mumbled.

"You shouldn't be hanging out by the zoo at this time of night. I'll walk you home."

"I don't need your help." Allie started walking away.

Shane blocked her way. "Why do you act like I'm dirt? Come on, Allie, talk to me. We used to be friends."

"Yeah, but you're in ninth grade now, in high school. Why would you waste your time on a junior high brat?"

"Sometimes you act like a brat."

"Thank you."

"I'm sorry, but you dumped me—without even telling me why. You never even gave me a chance to say sorry about your brother. You never answered my phone calls. When I waited for you after school, you ran away from me."

A sob threatened to break loose from her throat.

"Did I do something to hurt you? Did I say something wrong?"

Allie shook her head. She brushed past Shane. "I have to go home."

Shane grabbed her arm. She wrenched free. Something fell from her pocket. Shane picked it up. He stared at the plastic bag, then at her.

"Marijuana? I never figured you'd do drugs, Allie."

"I don't!"

"Then what are you doing with this?" Shane waved the bag under her nose.

"It's not mine. You don't understand." Her voice broke. "Please, let me go home!"

"Okay. But I'm walking with you. I want an explanation. You owe me one." They crossed Broadway and headed up Harvest Avenue. Shane kept talking. "I liked you a lot, Allie. Don't you remember? I asked you to go steady. You said you wanted to. What happened?"

"Please, stop, Shane. I can't talk now."

"All right. I won't push you. But I'm not taking no for an answer. Will you meet me tomorrow after school? At Foster's Freeze?"

"No. It's over, Shane. Can't you accept that?"

"Not without a reason. If you don't say yes, I'll tell your father about the marijuana."

Allie jerked to a stop and looked up at him. He meant it. He stared her down. Her heart skipped. She looked away so he couldn't see how she felt about him.

"That's blackmail."

"Promise you'll show up?"

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

She wouldn't let him walk her all the way to her house. Her father would blow a fuse if he thought she was out late with a guy.

Allie ran in the house. Her father waited in the living room. He looked ready to commit murder.

"Where have you been?" He folded his arms. "You lied to me. I called Kristi's house, and Mrs. Kennedy said you hadn't been there all evening. Get in here and tell me the truth!"

Eight

THE GRANDFATHER CLOCK CHIMED NINE-THIRTY. Allie stood in front of her father like a doomed prisoner waiting for the axe to fall. He sat in his black leather chair, his arms folded. She remembered what Irene had said about her mother being afraid.

"Why did you lie to me?" Her father watched her with the saddest expression she'd ever seen. He looked old. The skin around his chin hung loose. She'd never noticed the gray hair at his temples.

She started to shake her head, but something about the way he waited for an answer made her change her mind. "Because, I didn't think you'd let me go."

"Go where?"

"I needed to talk to some of . . . of Jimmy's friends."

Her father's lips tightened. "Why?"

"I had to ask them something about Jimmy."

"What?"

She hesitated. Then she blurted out about her mother cleaning out Jimmy's room and the diary. He looked so sad and so lost she said nothing about the marijuana.

"Peggy tore a page out of Jimmy's diary?" he said as if to himself.

Allie nodded.

Her father ran a hand over his hair. "Why did this make you want to talk to Jimmy's friends?"

"I thought what Jimmy wrote might have made Mom disappear."

"Allie . . ." Her father shook his head. "Is that why you went to see Doctor Diamond?"

"How'd you know that?"

"He called. He was concerned about you."

Sometimes you just couldn't trust adults.

"Your principal called too. He said you ditched school today."

Again Allie could only nod.

"I should punish you for what you did." He paused.

She didn't know what he wanted her to say. So she said nothing.

"But under the circumstances . . . I mean because of . . . What I'm trying to say is that I understand." He loosened his tie as if it were choking him. "I've done some things lately too that I can't explain. I know how you feel. It's like the old rules don't apply anymore. You do things you never thought you'd do."

She stared at the rug while he pulled out his handkerchief and blew his nose like a foghorn. This was crazy. He wasn't talking like her father.

When he spoke again even his voice sounded funny. "I know how much you miss your mother, Allie. You were so close, sometimes I was jealous. I never could talk to you the way she could." He cleared his throat.

"Dad . . ." She wanted to run to her room. He'd never talked like this before.

"Let me finish. I miss your mother as much as you do."

"You do?" The words slipped out before she could catch them back.

"Of course I do. Why would you even ask that?"

"Because . . ." She'd gone too far now. She'd have to finish. "Because you were always fighting. And because Irene said Mom wanted a divorce," she ended in a rush.

With a sigh, her father reached out a hand to Allie. She shook her head and held her hands behind her back.

"Just because two people argue, doesn't mean they've stopped loving each other. Your mother and I had stopped talking, stopped sharing. Jimmy's death tore us apart. It was my fault. Your mother locked Jimmy's door. I locked up my feelings. I was never there for her."

He stood up. "You're too young to understand, Allie. And it's late."

She headed for the stairs.

"Wait. I'm not going to punish you. But no more ditching school. No more running off to find your mother. Promise me."

Allie nodded.

"One more thing. I'll be coming home earlier from now on. But after school, you're to go to Mrs. Brumbaugh's house and stay there until I come home."

"What?" she exploded.

"You heard me. Mrs. Brumbaugh's agreed to watch you until I get home from work."

"Dad, I'm thirteen years old. I don't need a babysitter!"

"It's not good for you to be alone."

"I can take care of myself."

"Mrs. Brumbaugh's a kindly woman."

"She's a nosy old witch!"

"Allison! There'll be no arguing. That's the way it will be. Now go to bed."

Allie charged up the stairs to her room, slamming the door so hard the whole house shook.

She lay awake long after she heard her father climb the stairs to bed. The clouds disappeared from the sky and stars twinkled like diamonds. They made her angry. How could they shine when her life was so miserable?

She couldn't search for her mother with Mrs. Brumbaugh on her case. And she had to meet Shane at Foster's Freeze after school tomorrow. If she didn't show, he'd tell her father about the marijuana. She'd just have to think up a way to get around old Mrs. Brumbaugh.

She was drifting off to sleep before she remembered she hadn't even turned on the night light. She'd been too busy thinking of how to find her mother to be afraid of the dark. She already knew what she'd do tomorrow. Tomorrow she would follow a suspect.

Nine

"Where were you last night?" Kristi asked at school the next day. "I called a million times."

She looked like her eyes would bug out of her head when Allie told her about going to Wall Street, seeing Dr. Diamond, finding the diary and the marijuana, and talking to Jason Densmore.

"I can't believe you did all that. My mother would kill me if I snuck out."

Allie shoved her backpack into her locker. "I can't believe my father didn't ground me for life."

"Yeah, that's weird."

"But how can I meet Shane when Mrs. Brumbaugh's waiting to baby-sit me?" Allie slammed the locker shut.

Kristi snapped her fingers. "How about I call Mrs. Brumbaugh and tell her you had to stay after school to make up the work you missed."

"Great! She'll fall for that. I knew you'd come up with something."

"Years of practice. I've got two older sisters." Kristi shoved the gym door open. "Aren't you excited about meeting Shane?"

"No. I can't let him complicate things when I need to find my mother."

"He's such a hunk. If you don't want him, I'll take him." Kristi examined her hair in the wall mirror.

"He's all yours." Allie pulled her P.E. shirt over her head.

"I want to know every gory detail of your meeting." Kristi shook her tennis shoe. "I mean everything."

After school, Allie's courage deserted her as she neared Foster's Freeze. All the high school kids hung out there. The guys were so tall, and the girls seemed so sure of themselves.

Shane sat on one of the outside tables, his feet on the bench. When he saw Allie, he jumped up. He must be close to six feet tall. He looked so handsome in a navy blue sweater, blue jeans, and Nike high-tops.

"You want a soda?" he asked.

"Sure." Allie tried to sound like she met guys here all the time.

"Want to sit inside?"

"Fine with me."

They ordered root beer floats at the counter and carried them to a table back in the corner.

Allie sipped the soda too fast. Her throat stung from the coldness of it. She tried to keep from staring at Shane's eyes. She'd forgotten how blue they were.

"I read about your mother in *The Advance,* Allie. It must be awful not to know where she is. Is there anything new?"

"No. She's still missing."

"I'm sorry."

She didn't say anything.

''I guess it's not my business, but you scared me last night. What were you doing with marijuana?''

Allie watched the way his hands slid the straw up and down through the lid on the float. How much should she tell him? She searched his face. He seemed concerned. He wasn't stuck on himself or out to use people like some of the other jocks. They'd been good friends last year. They used to hold hands at school. Everyone said they made a cute couple. But that was last year. Could she trust him now?

''You okay?'' He touched her arm.

Tears filled her eyes. What a jerk he must think she was.

''Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned your mother.'' He looked uncomfortable.

Allie got a grip on yourself. ''No. It's okay. I was just trying to decide how much I could tell you.''

''About what?'' He removed the lid and spooned up some ice cream.

''My mother, my brother, and the marijuana.''

Shane frowned. ''There's a connection?''

''I think so.'' She drummed her fingers on her cheek. ''If I tell you everything, would you do me a favor?''

He narrowed his eyes. ''It's not something illegal, is it?''

''No. I just need your help.''

He bit his lip. ''After what you did to me, I ought to say no. But something tells me you're in some kind of trouble. What is it?''

''Promise you won't laugh or tell me I'm crazy?''

Shane raised his hand. ''I promise.''

She relaxed against the chair. ''Okay, here goes.'' She began with her mother's disappearance and every-

thing she'd found out yesterday. Shane listened without flinching or interrupting.

He whistled low when she was finished. "Wow, this blows my mind. No wonder you looked like you'd seen a ghost when I ran into you last night." He shook his head. "What's the favor?"

"I want to follow Jason Densmore."

"Follow him?"

"Yeah. Jason was lying through his teeth. I'm sure the marijuana was his. And he knows who my brother was going to blow the whistle on. My guess is it wasn't Jason. It could be someone who was selling drugs to Jason. He was scared out of his skull. Not because he smoked pot, but because he'd be in trouble from someone else. Maybe he can lead me to that person."

Allie sagged on her elbows. She felt drained.

"What do you want me to do?"

"I can't go out after dark. My dad cracked down on me after last night. You live near Jason, don't you?"

"Across the street."

"Do you know him?"

"Some. He's just a kid. His brother's a senior at my school."

"Do you know him?"

"Not really. They haven't lived there very long. Tim drives. He's got a brand-new limited-edition Mustang GT. It's great—black with gray interior, tinted windows. The frame is lowered a little. Boy, would I like that car. Got a five point eng—"

"Shane," Allie interrupted. She wasn't interested in Tim Callahan's car. "Could you tail Jason? See where he goes, who he hangs out with—if he connects with anybody suspicious?"

Shane scratched his chin. "I don't know. Sounds corny to me. I'd feel pretty stupid, sneaking around like a little kid."

"Like me?" She wanted to throw her root beer float in his smug face.

"I didn't mean you were a little kid."

"Just a junior high brat?"

He grinned. "Okay. I'm sorry about that statement. Let's call a truce, okay?" He reached out his hand.

Allie hesitated, then shook his hand. It felt warm and strong. She dropped it quickly.

"Will you follow Jason?"

"I suppose I could."

"Great." Allie checked her watch. What if Mrs. Brumbaugh called her dad? She stood to leave.

"Wait." Shane held her arm.

"I've got to go."

Shane shook his head. "Don't you realize if what you told me is true, then your brother may have been killed on purpose?"

Ten

SHANE'S FACE BLURRED. ALLIE HELD ON TO THE table.

"Are you okay? I didn't mean to scare you." He sounded scared himself.

She shook off his hand. "Let's get out of here."

Shane followed. They walked along Forest Avenue.

"I could be wrong, Allie. It probably was just a hit-and-run."

She shook her head. "Jimmy was murdered." The words shocked her. But for the first time in five months she knew she was right.

"Murder's a strong word." Shane held her hand as they darted across the street. She dropped it as soon as they reached the curb.

"It's the truth, though. My brother was dangerous to someone. I think he found out who was selling drugs to his friends. And knowing my brother, I bet he went straight to that person to find out the truth."

"How old was your brother?"

"Eleven."

"Was he a tough kid?"

Allie smiled. "Tough when it came to being right."

"Like you." Shane grinned.

She ignored that. "My mother read something in Jimmy's diary. I bet he wrote down his suspicions. Maybe he even wrote the guy's name. His friend Eric said he was going to talk to someone the day he was killed."

"Maybe that's why your mother is missing." Shane stopped dead in his tracks in the middle of the sidewalk.

Allie shivered in fear.

"You have to tell your father—or the police. You can't go poking around to find this guy. He might kill *you!*" Shane reached out to her.

She ducked under his arms and raced down North Burgher Avenue. Shane pounded the sidewalk after her. "Allie, wait!" he yelled.

She didn't stop until she reached the place that lived in her mind like a nightmare. Then she sank to the curb and sat with her hands between her knees.

Shane sat next to her. "What did you run for?"

"This is where Jimmy was hit. The police came to my house and said he'd been hit by a car on North Burgher Avenue." Allie choked on a sob. "I ran like crazy to find him. The ambulance was there—paramedics—people all crowding around. Then a paramedic who'd been bending over Jimmy stood up and told the cop there was nothing he could do. The cop held me back, but I started yelling that he wasn't dead—he was only sleeping. I still remember the smell of the cop's uniform as he lifted me back to the sidewalk."

"How did it happen?"

"Jimmy was riding home on his bicycle. It was almost dark. The cops said the guy driving the car proba-

bly didn't see him. And then he panicked and just drove off."

"Did anyone see the car?"

"No."

"Where had Jimmy been?"

"The playground. The one we passed on Forest Avenue. He used to hang out there with his friends—shoot baskets, play Ping-Pong. His friends said he'd left a lot earlier than the time he was hit. He must have gone somewhere else. We never knew where. It didn't seem important then."

"That was the day I asked you to go steady with me, wasn't it?" Shane picked up a pebble from the street.

"Yeah."

"Why wouldn't you talk to me afterward?"

Allie started to get up, but Shane grabbed her arm. "Don't run away again. Answer my question."

"Ouch! You're hurting me."

Tell me why you dropped me like a hot potato."

"I can't."

"Too chicken?" He threw the pebble into the street.

What was it Dr. Diamond had said? Sometimes you had to face something head-on. She lifted her chin.

"I wanted to go steady with you, Shane. I liked you a lot. But I wasn't supposed to stop at the store after school. I was supposed to go right home and watch my brother." Allie's voice shook.

Shane put his arm around her shoulder.

"Jimmy usually came home at two-thirty. I got home at three o'clock. He was supposed to wait until I got there before he went out to play." Tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Jimmy never told on me. He never tattled that I'd

stop by the store with my friends and not get home until three-thirty.'' Her lips shook so badly she could hardly talk. Shane bent closer to hear.

''He always waited for me. He never left until I got there. Except for the day he died. That day, he was gone when I got home. He'd been there. His backpack was by the door. An empty milk glass was in the sink.''

''Did he leave a message or anything?'' Shane asked.

''No. Nothing. At first I was mad at him. I thought I'd be in trouble. But when it started to get dark and he wasn't back, I got worried. And then the cop came.''

''I don't get it. What did that have to do with me?''

''Don't you see?'' Allie cried. ''Because I went to the store to be with you, Jimmy was killed. If I had come straight home, he might have told me what was going on. I could have stopped him. It's my fault Jimmy died!''

Eleven

ALLIE CRIED INTO SHANE'S SHOULDER UNTIL HIS sweater was damp. It felt so good to be held close by him.

She broke away first. "I have to go home."

"I'll walk you." He held her hand.

Mrs. Brumbaugh was sweeping her front porch, and she looked worried. She waved when she saw Allie.

"Howdy, Allie. Your friend Kristi called. I'm glad you let me know you'd be late. I made a fresh batch of peanut butter cookies. I bet you're hungry." Mrs. Brumbaugh spoke to Allie but her eyes in their wrinkled folds of flesh assessed Shane. Allie introduced him.

"Come on in. There's enough cookies for an army." She hobbled into the house. Allie questioned Shane with a look. He shrugged and ducked through the door behind her.

"How was school?" The old lady motioned for them to sit at the kitchen table. She poured milk into sparkling crystal glasses.

''It was okay.'' Allie gobbled up a warm cookie.

''Your mother told me how smart you are and how you got all A's on your report card.''

''Not all A's.'' Allie didn't want Shane to think she was a brain.

''She told me you want to be a cheerleader.''

''Are you trying out, Allie?'' Shane looked skeptical.

''Don't you think I'd make it?''

''Maybe you would. Maybe you wouldn't. How would I know?'' He shrugged.

''Your mother would be disappointed if you didn't give it a good shot.'' Mrs. Brumbaugh shook her head.

''How do you know so much about my mother, Mrs. Brumbaugh?''

''Your mother visited me often. When my hip gave me trouble she went to the store for me. In the winter she'd look in if she hadn't seen me for a day or two.'' The old lady smoothed the tablecloth before she finished. ''She's a genuinely good person.''

''Would she run away?'' Allie waited.

The old lady's faded blue eyes widened. ''Run away? From you? Never. And don't you let anybody tell you she did.''

Allie pressed her lips together to keep from crying. Mrs. Brumbaugh passed the cookies to Shane.

''What do you think happened to Mrs. McKenzie, Mrs. Brum . . . Brumbach . . . Can I just call you Mrs. B.?'' Shane grinned like a charmer.

''Sure. That's what Allie's brother, Jimmy, used to call me. He was another good one.'' She stopped and wiped her eyes.

''You didn't answer Shane's question.'' Allie grabbed another cookie. ''Where do you think my mother is?''

The old lady raised her hands and let them fall into her lap. "I wish I knew. All I know is she rushed out of your house, putting her jacket on as she ran down the steps. Then she backed the car out of the garage and drove off. That's what I told the police too."

"Did she seem upset?" Allie asked.

"I couldn't tell from my kitchen window. But she did seem in a hurry. Just like your brother did, the day he was hit by the car."

"You saw my brother leave the house?" Allie leaned closer.

"Yes. I was getting the newspaper from behind the hedge. I looked up and saw Jimmy running down the street like a house afire. 'Hey, Mrs. B.,' he called like he always did. Then he raced into your house. I had barely climbed my front stoop when out he came again. He took off real fast down the driveway on his bicycle."

"Are you saying he was only in the house for a couple of minutes?" Shane leaned on his arms.

"Yes. I called to him that he would get in trouble for not waiting for you, Allie, but he didn't hear me."

Allie pressed her hands to her face. "It wasn't my fault then," she whispered. "Jimmy left before I could possibly have come home."

"So that's what it was." Mrs. Brumbaugh sighed.

"What?" Allie asked.

"Your mother knew something was worrying you."

"She did?"

"If only you'd told her, you could have spared yourself a lot of grief." Mrs. Brumbaugh reached for the milk and refilled both their glasses.

"Mrs. B., could I walk Shane partway home?"

Mrs. Brumbaugh puffed out her lips. "I don't see

why not. Just be home when the streetlights come on. That's what I used to tell my children, a long time ago.''

Allie jumped up from the table. ''Thanks, Mrs. B.''

She and Shane hurried from the house.

''You don't have to walk me home,'' Shane said, outside.

''I'm not. I want to find Jason Densmore.''

''Why?''

''I want to keep an eye on him—maybe ask him some more questions.''

''What if he's not home?''

''You could find out, and if he's not, ask where he is.''

''What would I want with a sixth grader?''

''Make up something. Say you want to sell your bike.''

''I don't want to sell my bike.''

''Just pretend!'' Allie wanted to pound his arm. ''We just want to find out where he is, for crying out loud.''

''Okay, okay. Don't get excited. And quit pushing me around.''

When they reached Jason's house Allie waited by the curb, while Shane marched up to Jason's door and rang the bell. A younger girl answered. They talked for a minute before he ran back down the walk.

''He's not home,'' Shane reported. ''His sister said he went to the playground.''

''Good. That's where I'm headed then.'' She turned to walk away, then stopped. ''Thanks, Shane.''

''I'll go with you. Jason could be trouble.''

''I can take care of myself.'' Allie shrugged his hand off her arm, then slapped her forehead. ''Wow! I didn't

make the connection, but this is weird—the Forest Avenue Playground.''

''What are you talking about?''

She told him about the flashlight she'd found in her mother's closet. ''Jimmy was at the playground just before he was killed. And now we find out that Jason hangs out there.''

''Could be more than a coincidence. How did the flashlight get in your mother's closet?''

Allie shivered. ''I'm not sure I want to know.''

''Maybe your mother found it in Jimmy's room?''

''Uh-uh. The police would have noticed it when they searched my mother's room. The flashlight got there *after* the police search.''

''Who could have dropped it then?''

''That's what scares me.''

''Let me go with you, Allie. Please?''

''If you really want to.''

''I do.''

Shane's smile made her heart jump like crazy. How could she go weak in the knees over a pair of blue eyes when her mother was missing?

Neither of them said much on the way to the playground. Allie kept thinking about the flashlight. They ran down the steps to the playground, past the swings and the pool.

She stuck her head in the door of the big brick recreation building. She checked out who was playing Ping-Pong and pool. No Jason Densmore. The director looked her way, but she ducked out again.

''He's not in there,'' she said to Shane.

The basketball courts were behind the rec building and down another set of stairs. Allie paused at the top.

She nudged Shane. ''Look over there on the far court in the red shirt.''

''That's Jason, all right. He's playing with a bunch of older kids. I know them from school.''

''He thinks he's so hot.'' Allie made a face.

''Want to play a little one-on-one?'' Shane challenged. ''There's a free court next to Jason's.''

''Okay. But I'm warning you, I stink.''

''Let's get a ball and see.''

In the rec room, Shane gave his watch as security.

''I haven't seen you two around before.'' The director handed Shane a basketball. The guy must pump a lot of iron. His muscles were huge. He was maybe twenty or so. His black curly mop of hair hung to his shoulders. Something about him was scary.

''We haven't been here in a while,'' Shane explained.

''You live around here?'' He was asking a lot of questions, Allie thought.

''Yeah.'' She tapped her cheeks. ''Maybe you knew my brother, Jimmy McKenzie.''

His eyebrows rose. ''Yeah, I knew Jimmy. Nice kid. I liked him. I went to the funeral.''

Allie and Shane ran down to the courts.

''I'm not sure I like that guy,'' Allie said.

''The director? He seemed okay to me.''

On the court, Allie dribbled the basketball like a clumsy nerd. She missed most of her shots. Shane made all of his. He let her make a few easy layups. She hated it when guys went easy just because you were a girl.

Out of the corner of her eye she watched Jason. She knew he saw her, because he frowned and turned his face away. The guys he played with looked tougher than the group Jimmy used to hang out with.

Jason made crude remarks about girls. He laughed real loud when she missed a shot.

"You want to leave?" Shane asked her.

"No way!"

Allie was winded. The ball slipped from her hands and rolled to Jason's court. She ran after it. Jason charged for the ball and deliberately rammed into her. She fell flat on her back.

The other guys laughed. Jason bounced the ball right next to her face.

"Watch it, Jason." Shane elbowed him back and stretched a hand to Allie. She ignored it and scrambled up on her own.

"You all right, kid?" The director stood behind Jason, frowning at Allie.

She nodded.

"Jason, it's time you went home." The director squeezed Jason's shoulder so he winced.

"What if I don't want to?" Jason bounced the ball.

The director squeezed harder. "Beat it, twerp."

Jason threw an angry glance at Allie, slammed the ball to the ground, and stalked off in a huff.

"Hey, Mad Dog, shoot some hoops with us," one of Jason's friends called.

"Mad Dog?" Shane and Allie said in unison.

The director grinned. "The name's Rick Madison. Between my name and my hair the kids call me Mad Dog. I don't mind. Keeps you guys intimidated. But if you like basketball I'll give you a few pointers sometime." He saluted Shane and Allie and loped over to the other court.

They watched as he hooked shot after shot. He moved like a graceful cat around the court.

"We'd better go." Allie shivered. "It's getting dark."

In the rec room, Shane exchanged the basketball for his watch. A tall guy with huge hands and thinning hair handed them each a flyer. "Come to the basketball clinic tomorrow night," he said.

Allie looked at the flyer. The guy's picture was on it. He had once played for the New York Knicks.

The guy smiled. He had big teeth. "That's me, Bob Meer."

"You came to our school and spoke at an assembly about drugs last year." Shane shook his hand.

"I'm a recovered drug addict. Now I like to help kids not get hooked." Someone called Meer's name. "See you at the clinic." He walked away.

Allie exhaled. Drugs again. She knew kids who smoked pot or did drugs. She was too smart to get hooked on something so stupid and so dangerous. Maybe she'd been too smug, thinking drugs could never hurt her family. Maybe drugs were behind Jimmy's death and her mother's disappearance.

They hurried up the playground steps. Allie pulled Shane backward.

"What are you doing?" He grabbed the fence to keep from falling.

"Look." She pointed across the street. Mad Dog held on to Jason Densmore's bike like he wouldn't let him go.

"I thought Jason went home," Shane said.

"They're arguing. What's going on?"

Finally Mad Dog backed off, and Jason sped like a streak down the sidewalk. Mad Dog watched until Jason was out of sight.

"What was that all about?" Allie asked.

Shane shrugged and they continued homeward.

"Will you stake out Jason tonight?" Allie stopped at the corner of Bosworth Street.

Shane folded his arms. "Tonight? I have basketball practice."

"You said you would."

"I didn't think you meant tonight."

"I didn't mean Christmas!"

"Sor-ry."

"Forget it. Just forget it." Allie pushed by him.

Shane blocked her way. "I said I'd do it and I will. Just not tonight. I can't. Don't get mad." He bent his head to look in her face.

"It's okay. I understand. Tomorrow, then."

"I'll call you after school."

Allie ran down the street to Mrs. Brumbaugh's house. She couldn't wait until tomorrow. She'd have to get out of the house tonight to spy on Jason Densmore.

Twelve

ALLIE THOUGHT HER FATHER WOULD NEVER FINish dinner that night. He had two helpings of spaghetti and three cups of coffee. After doing the dishes she said she had homework. She went up to her room. Kristi telephoned at seven.

"How'd it go with Shane?" she asked.

Allie filled her in on all the details.

"Do you still like him?"

"I can't like anybody until I find my mother."

"I can't believe Shane said he'd help you."

"You know the trellis on the side of my house where my mother's morning glories climbed last year?"

"Yeah."

"Would it hold me if I tried to climb down it?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I've got to spy on Jason Densmore."

"You'll get in trouble," Kristi squealed.

"You want to come with me?"

"Are you kidding? On a school night? My mother would put me in a convent if I got caught."

Allie sighed.

"Be careful," Kristi pleaded before she hung up.

At seven-thirty, Allie pulled her bathrobe on over her clothes. She rolled up her jeans so they wouldn't show. Then she went downstairs to the living room where her father dozed in front of a Mets game on TV.

"Dad, I'm going to bed," she announced.

Her father came to with a jerk. "Huh?" His hair stood on end, and he looked worn out.

"I'm really tired, Dad. I'm going to sleep."

"You finish your homework?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. Sleep well."

In her room, Allie arranged her pillows under the bed covers so they looked like a person sleeping. Then she hung up her bathrobe, pulled on a dark sweatshirt, and tied her long hair back in a ponytail.

She shut the light. Like a blind bat, she rushed to the window. Focusing on the streetlight, she pressed her forehead against the cold glass. She took deep breaths. If she concentrated on her mother, the fear would disappear.

Slowly, she raised the window. Then, with as little noise as possible, she climbed out onto the roof. She remembered to shut the window behind her.

One careful step at a time, she picked her way across the sloping roof. Her foot slid out. She grabbed the drainpipe. Then she lowered her foot until it touched the top slat of the trellis.

Still hugging the drainpipe, she placed both feet on the trellis. It held. Her foot found the next slat. She kept going down, hand over hand, clutching the trellis.

With a shaking breath, she finally dropped to the

driveway. She waited a full minute. No one called her name. No doors opened. She was safe.

Then she raced across the driveway, down the sidewalk, and around the corner. She didn't stop until she reached Jason's street. Her side ached, and she thought her lungs would burst.

She leaned against a parked car. It was a good thing she did. A couple of kids were riding bicycles up and down Jason's driveway. Allie ducked out of sight.

Peering around the car, she recognized Jason and two guys he'd played basketball with at the playground. Across the street, Shane's garage stood open and empty. He must have gone to basketball practice. She didn't see Tim Callahan's Mustang anywhere. She was glad.

She crept closer to Jason and his friends. She crouched behind a big bush by the driveway. A chill wind blew against her face. Dark clouds moved across the sky, shutting out the moon. She shivered.

The guys rode over a jump they'd built. They talked and laughed about their attempts to outdo each other. Dumb boy junk.

Allie was ready to go home when one of the guys said, "Let's go to Bob's house."

"Shouldn't we call first?" the other guy asked.

"Naw. Not after dark. No one will see us."

"I have to be in by nine-thirty," Jason said.

"It's an easy ride up Clove Road to Victory."

They sped off down the street. Great. How could she follow them? She stared at Shane's house, willing him to come home. The streetlight shone on something metal in the garage. Shane's bike!

She raced across the street into the Schroeder garage. She grabbed the ten speed. For once she was grateful

for her long skinny legs as she swung her right leg over the bar of the bike.

She pedaled down the street and turned left on Clove Road. The boys had gotten a good jump on her, but on the ten speed, Allie caught up to them at Clove Lakes Park.

Careful to stay well behind them, she followed them to Victory where they turned left. A few blocks down, they veered right into a cement parking area behind a one-story apartment building with four carports under it.

Allie leaned the ten speed against the building. The boys' bikes were parked by a VW in one of the carports.

They must have gone into one of the apartments, but which one? Above the carports, each apartment had a railed-in porch. Could she climb up there?

At one end of the building, a grassy bank sloped up to the porches. Allie climbed the bank and stretched her arm until she touched the vertical slats of the railing.

She grabbed the slats and braced her feet against the building. Scraping and scrabbling, she seized the top rail. Then she pulled herself up and over onto the porch.

She crouched, panting. Sweat trickled down her sides. Splinters pained her hands. She didn't dare move. Her heart sounded like a drum. But no one came. No one looked out a window.

She crept to the first window. Her ragged breathing steamed the glass. Through a crack in the curtain she saw an old man and woman watching TV.

She sidled along the wall to the next apartment. A half raised miniblind hung in the window. Allie knelt to look in. Jason and his friends came into the room. She jerked back, banging her chin on the windowsill. Tears sprang to her eyes. She wanted to cry.

She took deep breaths. Slowly, she looked through the window. The three boys sat on the floor around a TV, their backs to Allie. They were playing Nintendo. To their right, someone sat on a couch. All she could see of him were his long legs. He wore blue jeans and white leather high-tops.

She moved her ear closer, but all she heard was laughter and snatches of words. She crouched until her knees cramped. All they did was play Nintendo and drink Cokes. Boring.

Maybe she was on the wrong track. It looked like an innocent visit to a friend or a relative.

The kid playing against Jason finally raised his arms in victory. Jason stood, looking at his watch.

The guy with the long legs headed for the window.

Allie jerked back against the wall. She held her breath. Her heart hammered like crazy. The miniblinds crashed closed.

With her hands pressed flat against the building, she waited. Nothing happened. Everything was quiet—except for her own breathing.

From below, loud voices split the silence. Jason and his friends. She heard their sneakered feet slap against the cement.

"Let me at my bike, ya jerk."

"I'll race ya home."

Allie tried not to move. She saw them just below, wheeling their bikes out of the carport. They jumped on the bikes and sped away. Their raucous voices floated back through the darkness. Then they were gone.

Allie inched her way to the railing. Her leg was straddling the railing when two guys walked into the parking area. She slammed back into the shadows. They climbed

the bank to the front of the house, so close she could hear their rough breathing as they climbed.

She jumped from the porch and slid down the slope. She raced to the front in time to see the guys walk into the second apartment. A hand from inside clapped one on the shoulder just before the front door slammed shut.

What was going on? Why were these kids visiting this guy?

Tomorrow she'd find out who lived in the second apartment. She ran back to her bike and swung it away from the building.

Someone grabbed her. He wrapped his arm around her neck and pulled hard. She dropped the bike.

"Hey!" She struggled to get loose.

"What are you sneaking around here for?" He smelled of cigarettes.

"Let me go!" Allie jabbed both elbows into the guy's chest. His grip loosened. But a second guy blocked her way. She was pinned between the two of them.

"He asked what you're doing here." The one in front shoved her. He had pimples on his face.

"The same reason you're here." She swallowed.

"Oh, yeah? You're just a punk kid."

"So? I came to see Bob too."

They backed off a little. The one behind stepped in front so he could see her better. They both wore black leather jackets.

"Let's see if Bob knows you." He shoved Allie toward the bank.

"Let her go," a voice commanded.

The guys and Allie whirled. Someone tall and huge stood in the shadows of the bushes.

"I said beat it!" He moved closer.

The guys turned and ran from the parking area, not even looking back over their shoulders.

Allie grabbed up the bike. She swung her leg over the seat and started pedaling.

"Wait!" The man in the shadows lunged for her bike. He grabbed the seat. The bike slid sideways. She pedaled hard. But he held her fast.

She sobbed and looked back into his face. It was Mad Dog! His dark eyes blazed. His hair bounced wildly around his head. Allie strained until she thought her neck would pop. The driveway sloped downward. The bike rolled forward with Mad Dog clinging to the seat.

"Stop!" She felt his breath on her neck. "I want to talk to you!"

With a desperate lunge, Allie thrust forward. His fingers slipped from the seat. The bike wobbled out of control. She pedaled like a crazy person down the sidewalk. Mad Dog pounded after her.

But once on the straightaway of Victory Boulevard, he was no match for the ten speed. Allie sped away.

By the time she reached Shane's house, her legs felt like rubber, her lungs like a balloon ready to burst. She crashed in a heap on Shane's lawn. If someone had come after her right then, she'd have been dead meat.

Shane's garage door was closed. When she'd gotten her wind, she propped the bike against the garage.

Then she walked home. Everything hurt—her feet, her legs, her hands, her shoulders. She saw lights on in the front windows of her house. Was her father still dozing in front of the TV or had he discovered she was gone?

Allie climbed back up the trellis. She was so tired

she wanted to cry. Somehow, she made it back across the roof and into her bedroom.

The pillows still lay arranged under the blankets. She peeled her clothes off. Too exhausted to find her nightgown, she crawled into bed in her underwear.

Just before dawn, the old nightmare returned. The sound of her scream woke her up. She dripped with sweat. She jerked up against the headboard. Her hands fought off his touch. She flailed the air in front her.

"Go away," she whimpered. "Mother! Mother!"

Then she remembered. Her mother was gone. She wouldn't come. She had to face him alone.

Tonight she had a weapon. "It wasn't my fault." She stared into the darkness. "You left before I got home. Why didn't you wait? You should have waited."

Hearing only the pounding of her heart, Allie waited. Silence. The tightness gripping her chest eased. The blankets fell from her fingers. From the window, the pale light of morning crept into the room.

Allie slipped from the bed. In the bathroom, she turned on the shower. Under the spray of hot water, she laid her plans. First of all, she'd have to break her promise to her father. She'd have to ditch school. Because she'd been following the wrong person.

Thirteen

IN THE MORNING SHE HAD TO REVISE HER PLANS. Her father insisted on driving her to school. She thought she could slip out the back gate before the bell rang, but her father marched her into the office to give the secretary Mrs. Brumbaugh's phone number as Allie's official baby-sitter. Allie was *so* embarrassed.

By the time they were finished, the bell had rung, the gates were locked, and she had no choice but to go to band class. Kristi's seat was empty. How could she be absent when Allie needed her? Now she *had* to escape from school. She couldn't stay without Kristi.

While Rottenburger took attendance, Allie thought of a way. She rushed from her seat in the saxophone section, one hand over her mouth, the other holding her stomach.

"I'm going to throw up," she gasped.

Rothenberg shoved the pass at Allie. "Run to the rest room. Sandra, go with her." He pointed at the girl who was first chair clarinet.

Allie ran with Sandra behind her. Inside the toilet cubicle, she poked her finger down her throat. She

gagged. She poked again. Her stomach heaved and out spewed the Froot Loops and milk she'd had for breakfast.

"You okay?" Sandra called.

Allie came out. She wiped her forehead and shook her head.

In the office, the school nurse asked if Allie wanted to go home.

"Yes. Call my baby-sitter."

The nurse spoke to Mrs. B. and said she'd send Allie home.

Mrs. Brumbaugh waited on the front porch. "You okay, Allie?"

"It's just cramps."

"Oh." Mrs. Brumbaugh opened the door. "Come lie on the couch. I'll make hot chicken soup. That's what I always did for my daughter. It will help. You'll see."

Allie shook her head. "I need to go the store. I need Kotex." She couldn't meet Mrs. Brumbaugh's eye.

"I can go to the store for you." She looked so concerned Allie almost blurted out the truth. She hated lying. But this time she had to.

"I'll be fine. First, I have to go home and get some money." Allie ran down the steps. "Don't worry if I'm gone long," she called over her shoulder.

Mrs. Brumbaugh looked worried already, but she nodded anyway.

In her kitchen, Allie paged frantically through the phone book. There were too many Madisons, and no Rick, so she dialed the playground. The phone rang and rang before a woman answered it, sounding out of breath.

"Forest Avenue Playground," she said.

"May I please speak to Mr. Madison?" Allie tried to sound grown-up.

"He ain't here right now."

"May I have his home phone number, please?"

"Gee, I don't know. He might be mad if I give it out."

"This is an emergency."

"Who is this?"

"Staten Island Hospital. Someone from his family had an accident."

"Oh, no! Are they hurt?"

"Yes. So, we need to reach Mr. Madison."

"Can't they give you his number?"

"He's unconscious. He needs surgery immediately."

"Oh, no. Just a minute, I'll get it."

Allie drummed her fingers on her cheek while she waited. The girl rattled the number off to Allie. She wrote it down.

"Does he still live on Clove Road?" Allie asked.

"It says here he lives at 3461 Castleton Avenue."

"Thanks." Then she dialed Mad Dog's number.

He answered on the third ring. Allie hung up. She grabbed a Twinkie and ran out to the garage. She wheeled her ten speed outside and hopped on.

Her legs felt stiff from last night's marathon ride. Luckily, Castleton was only five blocks from Forest Avenue. Mad Dog's address was not far from the library and Sacred Heart Church. The house was a brown duplex.

Allie watched from across the street behind an elm tree. She ate the Twinkie and hoped this was not a wild goose chase.

In half an hour, Mad Dog ran down the front steps

of the house, carrying a motorcycle helmet. He pushed a motor scooter from the garage and then drove off down Castleton Avenue. Allie shoved off after him. Thanks to traffic and stoplights at almost every corner, she had no trouble following him.

But when he turned left off Manor Road she thought she'd lost him. Mad Dog was nowhere in sight. She pedaled down the street, searching to the left and right.

Behind some bushes, metal gleamed. Mad Dog's motor scooter. She almost flew headfirst over the handlebars. She slowed but didn't dare stop until she reached the corner. She braked and jumped off her bike, propping it against the wrought-iron fence.

She peered around the corner. Mad Dog knelt by the fence. He looked through the bars like he was checking the place out.

It was an old white mansion, surrounded by acres of grass and trees, behind a tall wrought-iron fence. Everything was overgrown with weeds. It didn't look like anyone had lived there for a long time. A dilapidated barn looked ready to fall down, and two old garages needed paint. All the windows were either boarded up or shuttered. It must have been a really spectacular place when it was new. Right now, it looked spooky.

Mad Dog stood up. Then, like a cat, he jumped to the seat of his scooter, sprang to the top of the fence, and landed on the other side.

Allie crept closer. He picked his way stealthily around the whole place. He slid around corners of the buildings, tried to see into windows that were boarded up. He rattled doorknobs, pushed against heavy doors. He even raised the doors of a root cellar on the side of the barn.

What was he looking for?

Finally, Mad Dog scrambled back over the fence, wheeled his motor scooter out to the sidewalk, and headed out to Manor Road.

Allie checked her watch. It was almost three o'clock. She had to get home before Mrs. Brumbaugh called her father. She turned her bike toward home.

Mrs. B. Had a bowl of steaming chicken soup ready for her. It tasted good. Allie tried not to slurp, but she hadn't realized how hungry she was.

Tears came when she remembered how her mother would tie on a huge apron, wave a spatula around her head, and pretend to be an exotic dancer whenever she cooked dinner. If they were having spaghetti she'd sing "O Sole Mio." If they were having Mexican she'd croon "South of the Border."

"The soup too hot?" Mrs. Brumbaugh asked.

"Yeah." Allie wiped her eyes.

The doorbell rang and Mrs. B. went to answer it.

She returned, beaming from ear to ear, with Shane behind her.

"Hey, Allie." He slid into a chair across the table.

"Hi, Shane." He looked good in a red sweater and tight blue jeans. She wished she'd had time to comb her hair and put on some lipstick.

"Guess what happened to Jason Densmore?" Shane asked.

"What?" For some reason Allie held her breath.

"He got beat up."

Fourteen

"JASON GOT BEAT UP?" ALLIE'S MOUTH dropped open.

"Yup." Shane nodded. "Some guys jumped him last night and stole his wallet. They worked him over real good. I saw him this morning when I left for school. He had a shiner you wouldn't believe. His mouth was swollen to twice its size."

"This used to be a safe neighborhood." Mrs. Brumbaugh shook her head. "Now we have hoodlums and gangs."

"Jason wasn't beat up by a gang." Allie rapped her fingers on the table.

"That's what his brother was saying at school. I heard him say he was going after the goons that did it."

"I know the goon who did it." Allie nodded.

"Who?" Shane and Mrs. B. said together.

"Mad Dog Madison."

"Mad Dog?" Shane looked skeptical.

"Who's Mad Dog?" Mrs. B. looked lost.

Allie sighed. "It's a long story. I followed Jason last night."

"You did *what?*" Shane put his hands on his head.

Mrs. B. had that worried look again.

"I'll tell you everything that happened. But I don't want my father to know, Mrs. B."

The old lady pressed her lips together. "Does this have to do with your mother?"

She nodded. "I want to find her, Mrs. B. Everyone else has given up on her. I won't."

"You're spunky, just like your mother." She patted Allie's hand.

"Promise you won't tell my father?"

Mrs. B. rubbed her chin. "How can I do that? He trusts me. I can't keep things from him."

"Please, Mrs. B., for my mother's sake and Jimmy's. It's just like keeping a secret. Please?"

She sighed. "I'll promise not to tell what you've already done." She shook her finger. "But I won't keep something from him that is dangerous for you."

"That's fair enough," Allie admitted.

"Come on. Tell us." Shane waved his hands.

Allie retold everything that happened from the minute she'd climbed out of her room last night until she followed Mad Dog Madison to the deserted mansion this afternoon.

"You could have been hurt!" Mrs. B's teeth wobbled like crazy.

"Are you sure it was Mad Dog who grabbed your bike?" Shane scratched his head.

"Positive."

The phone rang on the counter. Mrs. B. struggled up to answer it. "It's Kristi." She held out the receiver.

"Where were you today?" Allie accused.

"I've got chicken pox! Can you believe it?"

"You haven't had chicken pox yet?"

"Nope. My mother says I have to stay home for a week. That's the pits. I'll miss the dance on Friday."

Allie bit back angry words. Her mother was missing, and Kristi thought getting the chicken pox was the end of the world. "What a shame," she said, "especially since you had a big date lined up."

"You don't have to be sarcastic." Kristi lowered her voice to a whisper. "Did you do it last night?"

"Yes, I did."

"Oooh. I don't believe you! What happened? Tell me every gory detail."

"Can I call you back later, Kristi? Shane's here."

"Shane? What's he doing there?"

"I'll tell you later. Hope you feel better."

After Allie sat back down at the table, Mrs. B. asked, "What has this Mad Dog done? And what does it have to do with your mother?"

"I think he's selling drugs to kids, using the playground as a cover. Maybe my mom found out."

"You don't have any proof, just suspicions." Shane tilted the chair back.

"But they add up to something." Allie counted off on her fingers. "First, he was at Bob's apartment last night. Second, he grabbed my bike. Then, today, he was snooping around an old mansion. And lastly, Jason gets beat up after we saw Mad Dog arguing with him yesterday afternoon. It all adds up."

Shane's mouth dropped open. "I just thought of something."

"What?"

"The initials R. M. in your brother's diary."

''Holy cow! I forgot about that. R. M. Rick Madison.''

''Where is this mansion you followed him to?'' Shane sounded excited.

She described it again.

''Could that be the Vandermeer mansion?'' Mrs. Brumbaugh's eyes grew big.

''You know it?'' Allie asked.

''Sure. The Vander Meerhuisen family goes back to the days of the early Dutch settlers. Along the way someone shortened the name to Vandermeer. Old Bertram Vandermeer was borough president when I was married. The house was a showplace then. He died some years ago.''

''Who owns the house now?'' Shane asked.

Mrs. B. pursed her lips. ''I read something about it in the paper recently. What was it?'' She hobbled up from the table. ''Maybe I can find the article. I donate my papers to the Salvation Army.'' She pointed to a stack of newspapers by the back door.

''We'll help you look.'' Allie grabbed a bundle and began paging through them. Shane did the same.

Mrs. Brumbaugh found the article. ''Here it is.'' She pulled her glasses from her apron pocket and propped them on the end of her nose.

''This was last Thursday's paper.'' Mrs. Brumbaugh read out loud. ''It says that Robert Vandermeer, the only surviving member of the Vandermeer family, has sold the family estate to a group that will use it for a drug rehabilitation center.''

''Drugs again.'' Allie slapped the table. ''Everywhere we look we find drugs.''

"Maybe Mad Dog is using the place to stash drugs," Shane suggested.

"Let's search—er—clean up these newspapers." Allie grabbed up the papers on the table. She jerked her head at Shane, who just looked puzzled.

The phone rang. Mrs. B. sighed as she picked it up.

Allie carried the papers back to the corner.

"It's your father." Mrs. B. held the phone out.

"Hi, Dad."

"I have to work late tonight, Allie. It can't be helped. I want you to stay at Mrs. Brumbaugh's until I get home. Okay?"

"Sure, Dad."

He paused, like he was surprised she didn't gripe about it. "Ask her if it's okay."

"My dad wants to know if I can stay here until he gets home, which might be late," she asked Mrs. B.

"Of course. If it gets real late you can spend the night. I have a spare bedroom."

Allie started to protest, then changed her mind. "Okay. But you'd better ask my dad." She handed the phone to Mrs. B.

While Mrs. B. spoke to her father, she turned to Shane. "Yes!" she mouthed so only he could see.

He smiled and shook his head at her.

"It's all settled." Mrs. B. hung up the phone. "You'll spend the night here if your father's real late."

"Thanks, Mrs. B." She touched the old lady's arm.

"What would you both like for dinner?" Mrs. B. rubbed her hands together like she couldn't wait to cook.

"I'm not hungry." Allie pressed her stomach.

"My mother's expecting me for dinner." Shane grabbed his books from the counter.

"I need to go to the library to get a book for a book report." Allie signaled to Shane by blinking. "But I don't want to walk back by myself in the dark."

"That's not a good idea." Mrs. B. shook her head.

"Did you say you were going to the library, Shane?" She couldn't believe he could be so dense.

He stared at her. Then he blinked. "Oh, yeah. I am. I could walk you home."

"Would that be okay, Mrs. B.?" Allie tried not to sound too anxious.

Mrs. B. stroked her chin. "Would your father mind?"

"Uh-uh. I go to the library all the time."

"Okay. As long as you're home before nine o'clock."

"I'll take care of her." Shane narrowed his eyes.

Allie almost choked over that.

Once they were outside, she steered Shane toward Clove Lakes.

"The library's that way." He pointed in the opposite direction.

"The Vandermeer mansion is this way. This is a perfect opportunity to search the place."

"You promised Mrs. B. not to do anything dangerous."

"We'll just snoop, not rob the place."

"In the dark?"

"A perfect cover. No one will see us. We can get a flashlight from your garage if you want."

"For a junior high brat, you're awfully pushy, know that?"

"So I've heard." She put her hands on her hips. "You're not chicken, are you?"

He laughed. "You got to be kidding. But something

tells me this is a dumb idea and I'm stupid for letting you talk me into it.''

''Nothing will happen. It's just a deserted old estate. What can go wrong?''

Fifteen

SHANE REACHED FOR HER HAND AS THEY WALKED toward his street. It felt good—safe and comforting.

"Shane, let's stop at Jason's house."

"Why?"

"Maybe he'll talk to us now that he's been beat up."

"I think he'll be scared stiff to open his mouth."

Nevertheless they rang Jason's doorbell. Allie backed into the shadows. His stepbrother, Tim Callahan, opened the door.

"Yeah? What do you want?" He took a drink from a can of Coke.

"Jason home?" Shane asked. "I want to ask him something about my bike."

"I'll get the jerk. Hold on."

"Whatcha want?" Jason looked awful, as if someone had used him for a punching bag. Tim stayed in the doorway.

"I want to sell my ten speed. You interested?"

"Uh-uh."

"It's a good deal. Come take a look at it." Shane started down the steps. Jason muttered but followed him across the street.

Allie joined them by Shane's garage.

"You!" Jason exploded when he saw her. "What's going on?"

"Who beat you up?" Allie scrutinized his bruises.

Jason spun around to leave. Shane grabbed his arm. "Just tell us."

"You ain't getting nothing from me." He jerked loose from Shane.

"Was it Mad Dog Madison?" she asked.

Jason stopped. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"He's been peddling drugs, hasn't he?" Shane asked.

Under the streetlight, Jason's face paled. "Let me go."

"You got beat up so you wouldn't talk, didn't you?" Shane moved closer.

"You were lucky, Jason," Allie said softly. "You only got beat up. My brother got killed."

Jason wet his lips. "Back off. I'm warning you. Or you'll end up just as dead as your brother." With those words, he ran across the street and into his house.

Neither she nor Shane said anything. Shadows moved on the sidewalk. She looked over her shoulder.

Shane blew out his breath. "Maybe we should back off. He may be right. This could be dangerous."

"No. I'm going to the Vandermeer place. I've got to find my mother." She strode down the street toward Clove Lakes Park. Shane caught up with her and they walked on in silence.

They stopped in front of the tall wrought-iron gate. Behind it, the estate looked eerie in the darkness. Huge trees and dense bushes made it seem like a jungle.

"Can you climb over this gate?" Shane asked.

"If you can, I can." Allie touched the scrolling in the center "We could step on this."

"You go first. I'll give you a boost."

She stepped into Shane's cupped hands, grabbed the bars, and climbed on the scrolling. The gate swung inward.

"It's open!" She jumped down.

"There's an open padlock on the inside handle."

"Maybe someone's in there," Allie whispered.

"Maybe we'd better leave."

"No. Let's check it out."

They circled the property, staying close to the fence. Leaves and dead brush crackled under their feet. Allie counted four buildings other than the main house: a barn, two garages, and a sloping-roofed shed.

Shane stopped short. Allie bumped into his shoulder. "Ssh." He pointed up ahead to one of the garages. Two men came out of a garage, carrying bundles. They stacked the bundles in the trunk of a car, then made half a dozen more similar trips between the car and garage. Neither man spoke. They moved very quietly.

"What are they doing?" Allie whispered.

Shane put his finger on his lips.

When the trunk was full, one man slammed it shut. The other locked the garage door. Both men jumped into the car. They drove slowly down the dirt track to the gate with the headlights off.

"They sure didn't want anyone to see what they were doing, did they?" Shane watched the red taillights.

"I bet it was drugs." Allie nodded. "They had to get rid of the evidence, because this Vandermeer guy is selling the place. They can't use it to store drugs anymore."

"Could you see who it was?" Shane asked.

"It was too dark. I bet one was Mad Dog, though."

"Let's take a look in that garage."

Standing on tiptoe, Allie peered through one of the dirty windows. All she could see were dark shadows.

"I can't get this dumb flashlight to work." Shane shook it so it rattled.

"Shane, the car's coming back!" The rumble of a car engine headed their way.

"Quick, behind the barn," he whispered. They huddled together against the barn. Allie's heart hammered so loudly she was sure they could hear it. The car stopped. Doors slammed. Feet crackled the brush.

She peered around the barn. A flashlight swept the shrubbery. She jerked back. The light moved closer.

"I don't think anyone's here," a voice said.

"Why was the gate open, then?"

"Maybe the wind blew it open."

"A big gate like that? Let's check this garage first. Then we'll check the grounds."

The voices disappeared into the garage.

"We've got to hide." Shane pulled her along the barn.

"In the root cellar," she whispered. "I saw Mad Dog open it this afternoon." She ran to the wooden doors angled against the side of the barn. Together they lifted one of the doors.

Allie descended the stone steps first. Shane lowered the door shut over their heads. A vertical door blocked their way. There was just enough room for the two of them to crouch in front of the door.

Shane gripped her hand. She could hear his breathing as they waited, motionless.

Muted voices. A pinpoint of light through the crack of the sloping doors above them. Allie held her breath. There was a scraping noise, like something was being dragged across the door.

''There, that should hold it,'' someone said.

''Yeah, just in case,'' someone else answered.

The car engine started up. Then only silence.

Allie broke the silence first. ''I think they're gone.''

''Let's get out of here.'' Shane stood in a crouch and shoved the door. Nothing. He pushed harder.

'What's the matter?'' She hated the way her voice sounded panicky.

''I can't open it. They must have locked it!''

Sixteen

"Don't panic," Shane said. "We'll find a way out."

The close darkness surrounded her. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. "I can't. I've got to get out. Help!"

Shane grabbed her shoulders. "Close your eyes. Take deep breaths."

She tried, but the terror came anyway. Her stomach cramped, her legs turned to jelly, and a roaring filled her ears. She jumped up, hitting her head on the door. She flailed with her arms. From somewhere she heard a wailing sound. It was her.

A hand cracked across her face. Stunned, she fell against Shane.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" His arms encircled her.

She clutched his shirt and panted like she'd just run a mile.

"Are you claustrophobic? My mother is."

She nodded.

"Hang on. You'll be okay. Easy now. I've got you." He stroked her face with one hand and rubbed her back with the other.

Her breathing quieted. Shane's cheek touched hers. His arms tightened around her.

"Allie?" His voice sounded funny.

She waited, their faces just inches apart. His breath moistened her mouth. His lips brushed hers. Just the lightest of touches. It took her breath away.

"Shane." Her voice sounded odd.

His mouth met hers again. This time his lips pressed harder. They moved against hers. She swayed toward him. Her lips moved under his. A trembling swept through her. A sweetness she had never felt before filled her.

"You okay?" he said against her cheek.

"Yeah." She exhaled.

"We should try to get out of here," Shane mumbled into her hair. "Don't you think?"

"Probably."

They broke apart. Shane shook the flashlight. "If only I could get it to work. There. It's on."

The light blinded her. "Shine it on the doors. Maybe we can see what's holding them shut."

Through the opening between the doors, they could see a thin piece of wood.

"They must have slid that through the handles. If we had something sharp, we could work it out." Shane swept the flashlight around the floor.

"What's that in the corner?" Allie picked it up. "A hairbrush. How'd it get here?"

Shane grabbed the brush. "The pointed end will work great. You hold the flashlight."

He jabbed the handle into the crevice and slid it back and forth on the piece of wood.

"It's moving!" She held her breath until the wood was dislodged and rattled down from the handles.

"Yippee." She clapped her hands.

Shane pushed the doors open. The cold night air rushed in, fresh and welcoming. They scrambled up the stairs and outside.

Allie gulped in the fresh air.

Shane grabbed her hand. "Let's get out of here."

"Wait, where's the brush?"

"In the cellar where I dropped it. Why?"

She ran back down the stairs and retrieved the brush. "Shine the flashlight on it." She turned the brush over. On the underside of the handle was a red initial *P*.

"This is my mother's brush. She's been here!"

Seventeen

"LOTS OF GIRLS HAVE BRUSHES LIKE THAT, Allie. My sister does," Shane argued.

"I have one too. See the red *P* on the handle? I wrote that one day with my mom's red nail polish. We were always getting our brushes mixed up. I know it's hers."

"If you're positive, you better show it to the police."

"They wouldn't believe me. They didn't before. Besides, what would they do?"

"They could search this place—turn it upside down."

Allie froze. "Do you think my mother could still be here?"

"I don't know." He stared at the ground.

The way he said that made her afraid. "Do you think they killed her and hid her body here?"

"Allie, don't say—"

"Maybe they caught her snooping around. Maybe she saw the drugs in that garage."

"That doesn't mean they killed her."

"They may have killed Jimmy."

"Allie—"

"Stop trying to protect me, Shane! I want to know

the truth. I'm not a little kid who's going to fall apart. I know about death. When it comes, you can't stop it. You can't change it even though it almost kills you, too. But you go on living. It's the not knowing that tears you up."

Shane didn't say anything.

"Maybe that's why my mother disappeared. Maybe that's the reason the police can't find her. She's dead."

"They haven't found her body either."

"No. But it's the only reason I can think of right now why my mother wouldn't come home to me."

Shane pulled her close.

"What if she's dead?" she sobbed.

"Don't think the worst. We don't know what's happened to her. But I do know you've got to tell your father about all of this."

"He's not home."

"Tomorrow's Saturday. He'll be home then, won't he?"

"I guess so. But what's he going to do about it?"

"Call the police. They'll listen to an adult."

"Maybe."

"They can at least search the entire estate."

"Only if they have enough evidence for a search warrant. I've read enough detective books to know the police can't walk in and search a place without just cause."

"The only real evidence we have is the flashlight you found in your mother's closet."

"And that has to belong to Mad Dog Madison. He works at the Forest Avenue Playground."

"Maybe his fingerprints are on it."

"No, my fingerprints are on it."

Shane sighed. "Let's get out of here." They headed for the gate and climbed back over it.

Allie checked her watch. "We'd better run. It's eight-thirty. My warden awaits."

Mrs. Brumbaugh was so relieved to see them, she hugged Allie. "Your father got home five minutes ago. I was so afraid he'd come over to get you."

Allie hugged her back. "Would you mind if I went home, since my dad's back?"

"I understand." But she sounded disappointed.

Shane acted like he wanted to kiss her again when they said good night outside her house. But she was afraid her father would look out the window and see them. So she gave him a quick peck on the cheek before she ran up the steps and inside.

Her father was dialing the telephone. When he saw her, he hung up. "I was just calling Mrs. Brumbaugh."

"She saw your car, so I came on over."

"I'm glad."

"Did you have dinner?"

"I had a couple of hot dogs on the ferry."

"I can make you something if you want."

"No. Thanks, anyway."

She headed for the stairs.

"I heard you cry out last night."

Allie turned.

He stood there fiddling with his tie. "Was it a nightmare?"

She nodded.

"I didn't know if you wanted me to come to your room. Your mother always did that."

"It's okay. You don't need to."

"How was school today?" He sat down on the edge of the couch.

"I went home during second period." She was tired of lying.

"Why?" He frowned.

"Stomach cramps."

"Oh."

"Dad? Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. Anything."

"I think I know—" The telephone interrupted.

Her father reached to pick it up. "It's Kristi. Do you want to call her back?"

The moment had passed. "No. I'll get it upstairs." She took the steps two at a time, grabbed the hall phone, and carried it to her room. She shut her door and sat cross-legged on the bed. "I got it, Dad." He hung up.

"Where have you been?" Kristi asked.

"Looking for my mother."

"I wish I didn't have this stupid chicken pox, so I could help you."

"It's okay. How do you feel?"

"Itchy. I've got blisters in my hair, my mouth, up my nose, and in places I don't even want to mention. Forget me. Tell me what's happened."

Allie related everything she'd found out.

"I agree with Shane. I don't believe your mother's dead. She's tough and gutsy just like you. Besides . . ." Kristi hesitated.

"What?"

"Something you once told me about dead bodies."

"What? Spit it out."

"Don't they stink after a few days? Wouldn't someone have noticed?"

"You're right. You're absolutely right. Thanks. I needed to hear just what you said."

"I've been thinking about that flashlight, Allie. If it's not your family's and it wasn't there when the police searched the room, then . . . then, somebody's been in your house. How else could it have gotten there."

Allie sat still. The wind outside whispered through the trees. The clock on her nightstand ticked.

"Allie? Are you still there?"

"Thanks for sharing that with me, Kristi. I feel real good about going to sleep now, knowing Mad Dog Madison has access to my house."

"It could be someone else."

"Who else works at the Forest Avenue Playground?"

"Anyone who goes there could have picked up the flashlight."

The picture of Bob Meer walking into the playground office jumped into her mind. "It's possible." Allie drummed her fingers on her cheek. "I've got to go, Kristi. My dad's calling me. Talk to you tomorrow."

Bob Meer. No. He spoke at schools. Allie flopped on her stomach. But Jason and his friends had gone to a Bob's apartment. Could it have been Bob Meer? And Mad Dog was there. He knew Bob Meer.

How could she find out where Bob Meer lived? She snapped her fingers. The phone book.

She ran to the hallway, pulled open the drawer of the phone stand, and grabbed up the phone book.

"Allie? You off the phone?" her father called from downstairs.

"Yeah, Dad." Then she scooted back to her room with the phone book.

She crossed her fingers that he was listed. Yup, he

was. Robert Meer. She gasped when she read the address. Victory Boulevard.

She dialed Shane's number. "Guess who lives in that apartment I followed Jason to?"

"Who?"

"Bob Meer."

"The ex-basketball player? The one who goes around to the schools talking about drugs? He used to be a drug addict."

"You got it."

"How did you find out?"

She told him. "What if he's the drug pusher?"

"I seriously doubt it. I've heard he helps kids who are in trouble. Jason and his friends probably go to his house because he's a nice guy."

"What was Mad Dog doing there then?"

"I don't know."

"And why did those two guys grab me and want Bob to identify me?" Allie argued.

"I don't know that either."

"Think about it, Shane. He'd have a great cover for selling drugs to kids."

"We can't go accusing innocent people for no reason."

"What if the flashlight I found in my mother's closet is his? He has access to the playground."

"Have you talked to your dad yet?"

"I'll do it tomorrow."

"I'll call you then. Are you okay?"

"Sure. Thanks for going to the mansion with me."

"No problem. I'll see you tomorrow."

She paced her room after she hung up. If only they'd

been able to explore the mansion more. She was sure that the old place held the key to everything.

She tapped her cheek. Maybe there was another article about it in today's newspaper. The one they'd read at Mrs. Brumbaugh's was a week old.

She ran downstairs. Her dad was eating a bowl of cornflakes in the kitchen.

"Where's the paper?" she asked him.

"I threw it in the trash when I was done with it. I didn't think you ever read it."

"Sometimes I do." Allie fished it out of the trash basket.

Her dad rinsed his bowl under the faucet. "I'm going to bed, Allie. What about you?"

"Me too. I'll take the paper upstairs with me."

She raced up to her room. She heard her father trudge past her bedroom.

On the second page she found the article she wanted. It stated that the Vandermeer mansion had been sold to a drug rehabilitation group. Local businessmen were volunteering time and equipment to help renovate the estate. Tomorrow, a wrecking crew, donated by a local contractor would demolish a dilapidated barn and shed on the property.

Tomorrow? Then there's be no chance to search the estate. Allie jumped up from the bed, scattering the newspaper all over the floor. She bent to crumple it up when a face stared back at her from one of the pages. A familiar face with a toothy smile and thinning hair.

Robert Meer, ex-basketball star, ex-drug addict, and former owner of the Vandermeer mansion!

She grabbed the page and spread it across the bed.

The picture was the same one she'd seen on the flyer at the playground announcing the basketball clinic.

Robert Meer. Of course. Why hadn't she seen it before? The family name had been shortened once, and Bob Meer had shortened it even further. Vander Meerhuisen had become Vandermeer, and Vandermeer became Meer.

Bob Meer had owned the Vandermeer mansion—the mansion where strange things were happening, the mansion where she had found her mother's brush.

Allie read further. The basketball clinic had started today with a demonstration on the court this afternoon and a slide show talk tonight at eight o'clock.

It was nine o'clock already. No time to call Shane. She had to reach the playground before Bob Meer left. If he knew anything about her mother, she'd get it out of him!

Eighteen

ALLIE CLIMBED DOWN THE TRELLIS AND RACED to the Forest Avenue playground. She was out of breath, but she'd made it on time. Kids still hung around inside the rec building. Parents stood in groups waiting to take their kids home.

She shoved through the door and spotted Bob Meer in the middle of the rec room. He stuck out like a giant in a crowd of kids wanting his autograph. What a fake. If she hadn't been so winded she'd have rushed over and socked him in the stomach.

"You show up everywhere, don't you?"

Allie spun around and faced Tim Callahan. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I brought my little brother to see the superstar." Tim jerked his head toward Meer.

"Don't you like him?"

"What's to like? The kids think he's a god just because he once played for the Knicks and can hook a sky shot."

"Do you know him?"

He shrugged. "No, I don't know him."

"Do you visit his apartment like your brother does?" She couldn't believe her nerve. But she knew her question hit home from the way he narrowed his eyes.

A heavy hand spun her around. "Hey!" she said.

Mad Dog Madison looked like he wanted to strangle her. "I want to talk to you, kid."

"Why?" Allie heard her voice shake.

"Tim, get lost. This is private." Mad Dog jerked his thumb for Tim to leave them alone.

Tim looked at Allie. "Don't let him push you around, little girl."

If he hadn't called her little girl she might have told Mad Dog to get lost, too. Instead she said, "It's okay. I've got a few questions for him, too."

"It's your life." Tim sauntered off toward Meer.

Mad Dog pulled her into a corner. "What were you doing at Meer's apartment last night?" he demanded.

"What were *you* doing there?" she retorted.

"Don't get smart. Just answer my question."

"I don't have to."

"You're not like your brother, are you?" Mad Dog's face softened.

"No. But I'm Peggy McKenzie's daughter. If you read the papers, you know she's missing. All I want to do is find my mother."

Mad Dog rubbed his chin. "Look, let me give you some advice. I liked your brother. You're probably not as cranky as you act, either. Stay away from Callahan and his brother, Jason. They're bad news."

"What were you doing at the Vandermeer mansion?" Allie watched him closely.

"What?" He moved back.

"I followed you there."

"You're gonna get hurt." Mad Dog shook his finger at her. "I'm warning you."

"Are you and Meer in this together?" she asked on a hunch.

"In what?"

"Drugs."

Mad Dog lunged for her arm. She backed away.

"Who's your friend, Rick?" Behind Mad Dog stood Bob Meer. He smiled, but it made her skin crawl.

Mad Dog seemed annoyed. "Bob, this is Allie."

"Allie. Short for Allison, right? I saw you the other day, right?"

She nodded.

"What's your last name?"

"McKenzie." Allie thought she saw a gleam of recognition in his eyes. Maybe it was her imagination.

"Do you play basketball?" Meer smiled, showing big wide teeth. A front one was chipped.

She took a deep breath. "No. I came to return a playground flashlight someone dropped in my house."

Dead silence. Mad Dog stared at her. Bob Meer stared at her. No one moved.

"You want a ride home, Allie?" Tim Callahan stood behind them with Jason. He scowled at her.

"My dad's picking me up," Allie lied. She was angry at Tim's bad timing.

He shrugged. "Your choice."

"Have you been to a doctor?" Mad Dog looked Jason over. His bruises had turned an ugly purple color.

Meer clapped Jason on the shoulder. "Jason's tough."

"Come on, twerp. Let's get some punch before we split." Tim poked Jason in the ribs. Jason winced.

"I'd go to a doctor if I were you," Mad Dog called after them. *What a hypocrite,* Allie thought.

She slipped around the two men. "I've got to go."

"Take care." Meer smiled. Mad Dog rubbed his jaw, deep in thought.

Allie hurried from the rec building and around to the back where she leaned against the rough bricks. Her heart hammered like crazy.

Were Mad Dog and Meer in this together? Did they know where her mother was?

Allie sidled along the building until she reached the window of the office. It was streaked with grit and grime and protected by bars, but she could see into the room.

She peered around the edge of the window. Bob Meer stood just inside the doorway, an angry look on his face. Someone sat by the desk. But all she could see were his white leather tennis shoes. Meer shook his fists like he was telling the guy off.

Was it Mad Dog? Meer walked to the window and stood with his back to it. She strained to hear what he said.

"No!" Meer raised his hand. "This time we'll do it my way."

She couldn't hear what the other guy answered.

Meer nodded. "The wrecking crew will do the job for us. Don't worry. There'll be nothing to point the finger at us. Tomorrow morning we'll be home free."

Meer walked to the door. "I want to shoot a few baskets before I leave."

Allie tore away from the building over to the swings. She crouched down low, until she saw Meer walk back to the courts. Then she raced for the front gate.

She ran halfway home before she stopped. She sat down on the curb between two parked cars to think.

What did Meer mean when he said the wrecking crew would do the job for them? The newspaper said heavy equipment would knock down the barn and shed. What was in them to point the finger at Meer? She and Shane had already watched them remove everything from one of the garages.

Whatever it was would be gone by tomorrow morning, crushed by the bulldozers.

She had to go to the mansion tonight. Right now.

The something in the barn could be a *someone*. What if it were her mother?

Nineteen

Allie cut through Clove Lakes Park. She ducked behind bushes and trees whenever a car drove by. A gang of toughs made her run for cover under a bridge. She huddled on a bank, her feet in two inches of water until they were out of earshot. She was freezing.

To keep warm, she ran the rest of the way to the old mansion. Dark clouds covered the stars, and a cold wind stirred the trees. It would probably rain before morning.

Allie climbed over the locked gate. She hid behind a hedge until she was sure no one had followed her. Her heart hammered like a drum. The wind rustled through the trees. A dog barked in the distance. A car drove by on the road. The wind picked up dry leaves and scudded them over the ground.

Allie wanted to run home. Instead, she drew a deep breath and pushed through the undergrowth to the old shed. The roof had caved in. Rotting timbers made the walls buckled. She peered through the gaps. It smelled musty.

Allie turned her attention to the barn. The double doors were bolted and locked. She tugged on the han-

dles. They didn't budge. A side door was locked and barred, too. On one side, Allie found a window, but it was over her head. She needed something to stand on.

She dashed back to the shed. On her hands and knees she crawled through a gaping hole. A jagged edge of wood stuck her arm. Inside, it was pitch-black. She stumbled around, bumping her shins. Cobwebs brushed her face. Something rustled by her feet, and she gasped.

Finally she touched what felt like a wooden crate. Dragging it back to the opening, she half carried and half shoved it to the barn and under the window.

Then she searched the ground until she found a rock the size of a baseball. She climbed on the crate. Her shoulders cleared the windowsill.

She slammed the rock against the window. Glass splintered in all directions. Shards flew by her face. She crouched on the crate and waited. No one came. No one yelled. No one had heard.

She pushed the remaining glass from the windowframe with the rock. Then she pulled herself up to the sill, eased her legs over, and dropped down into the barn.

She bit her knuckles while her eyes adjusted to the blackness. Pale light filtered in the window. She saw shadows of objects stacked here and there. She forced herself to move. Cobwebs clung to her face. She gagged. A spider crawled on her neck. She brushed it off and sobbed.

She touched tools, gardening equipment, old milk crates, old furniture. A ladder. Good. She'd need that to get out again.

Dust flew up in her nose and made her sneeze. Mice scurried in the corners. Allie examined every square

inch of the barn. There was nothing suspicious, nothing unusual. But there *had* to be. Meer said the wrecking crew would destroy some kind of evidence.

Then it had to be in the shed. The thought of crawling around again in that rotting place made her shudder.

She dragged the ladder across the wood floor. The scraping noise set her teeth on edge. She crossed her fingers, hoping that no one heard.

She set the ladder under the window. What was that? She held her breath and didn't move. There it was again. A faint cry. Her nose prickled. She sneezed—again and again. She couldn't help it.

There it came again. Louder this time. A voice—definitely a voice from somewhere close, but hollow sounding.

"Who is it?" Allie spun around. "Where are you?"

She closed her eyes and waited. This time a little louder. It sounded like it came from under her feet. Was there a basement?

She searched for steps, for a trapdoor. But she found nothing. Maybe an outside door led to a basement. The root cellar! Of course. There had been a door where she and Shane had hidden. And the two men they'd spied on had secured the outer doors, as if they were afraid someone might try to get out. Allie's breath caught in her chest.

On shaking legs, she climbed the ladder, maneuvered out the window, and dropped to the ground. She raced around the barn to the root cellar.

She lifted the sloping doors. A dank smell wafted from the darkness. She ran her hands over the inner door. A locked padlock hung from a metal hasp. There was no way she could open it.

''Are you in there?'' She pounded with her fists. ''Please, answer me.''

''Help. Help.'' The words were faint, but Allie understood them. Someone was locked inside. And it sounded like a woman.

Sobs broke from her throat. ''Mom!''

She heard an answering cry. The police would believe her now. They'd hear with their own ears that someone was in the root cellar.

Allie charged up the stone steps, smack into someone at the top. She teetered backward. He grabbed her.

''You pesky kid.'' Mad Dog Madison held her with a steely grip.

''Let me go!'' she yelled.

''What are you doing here?''

''My mother's in there. Let her out!''

Mad Dog swore. ''Why couldn't you stay out of this?''

''Is that why you killed my brother—because he knew too much?''

He sucked in his breath. ''Your big mouth is going to get you killed.'' His grip tightened.

Twenty

MAD DOG'S GRIP LOOSENED. HE CARRIED ALLIE down the steps of the root cellar like a sack of potatoes.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"We'll see if your mother's in there." He jingled a key ring. With one hand on her arm, he tried each key in the padlock. When one didn't work, he swore.

"Come on," he muttered. Allie held her breath. The padlock opened. Mad Dog kicked the door wide. He shoved Allie into the cellar first.

"Mom?" She waited in the dark. The dampness touched her face.

Mad Dog beamed a flashlight around the cellar.

In a far corner, Allie saw her. She lay on the floor, covered with a blanket. Her eyes were closed. For one awful moment, she thought she was dead.

"Allie?" The voice sounded weak and thin.

She rushed to her mother. Kneeling, she held her hand. "Are you okay, Mom?"

"Just weak." Allie had to bend down to hear. "He shoots me with tranquilizers, so I can't escape."

She spun around to Mad Dog. "You creep! How could you do this to her?"

"You think *I* did it?" He shined the flashlight in her eyes.

Her mother tugged on her hand. "You shouldn't have come here. He'll be back. He always comes at night."

"He's here already."

Her mother shook her head.

"Who?" Allie was confused.

Mad Dog yelped. An arm crashed down on his head. He crumpled like a rag doll to the dirt floor. His flashlight fell from his hand. It shined on a pair of white tennis shoes in the doorway.

Allie's gaze traveled up to the jeans, the Levi's jacket, the wide teeth, the thinning hair. Big hands held a gun.

"Like mother, like daughter." Bob Meer's voice chilled her. "Now you can die together."

Allie blocked her mother. "Don't shoot us."

He laughed. "Don't worry, shooting you is not my plan. You won't feel a thing when this barn comes crashing in on you tomorrow morning."

"My father will come looking for us." She gripped her mother's hand.

"No one found your mother."

"I did." Allie stuck out her chin.

"Too bad for you, isn't it?" Meer turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" she cried.

He slammed the door shut behind him.

"Don't leave us here!" she shouted.

She heard the padlock snap shut. Then only silence.

"Is that why he kept you here, Mom? So you'd die when they bulldozed the barn?"

Her mother nodded. ''He can't be accused of murder that way, he said.''

''But how would he explain your being here?''

''He's been pumping me full of drugs so I'll look like a druggie who didn't know what she was doing.''

''Not if I can help it.'' Allie drummed her fingers on her face like crazy.

''He'll be back to give us the shots. Otherwise we'll make too much noise.''

The way her mother said that made Allie's skin crawl. It sounded like her mother had already accepted her fate.

''How did you get here, Mom? Was it what you read in Jimmy's diary?''

Her mother nodded. ''Jimmy wrote that Bob Meer was a drug supplier. He used kids to sell the drugs. Jimmy wrote that he was going to get proof the day he died.'' Her words were slurred when she spoke.

''What about Mad Dog Madison? Where does he fit in?''

''Is he the man on the floor?''

''Yes. Isn't he in this with Meer?''

''I've never seen him before. Just Meer. I called him that day. He said to meet him at the old Vandermeer estate. Like a fool, I went.''

Allie exhaled. ''I knew you didn't run way.''

''I was so afraid you'd think I had abandoned you.''

She kissed her mother's cheek. ''It's okay, Mom. Don't talk anymore. Just rest.''

''How's your father?''

''He's worried sick about you. He said he loved you,'' Allie blurted out.

''Your father said that?''

''Yes. He's been pretty okay. Nicer.''

Her mother sighed.

"Don't talk. I'll think of a way to get us out."

Mad Dog moved. Allie felt around on the dirt until she found the flashlight. She beamed it on Mad Dog. He sat up, holding his head. "Ow," he moaned.

"Help him." Her mother pressed her hand.

"Help *him?* He's Meer's partner."

"You've got it all wrong," Mad Dog said.

"I don't think so."

"Why would Meer knock me out if I'm his partner?"

"Maybe you double-crossed him."

"Give me a break."

"Explain it, then," Allie challenged.

"I've been suspicious of Meer for a long time. That's why I was following him."

"Looks more like he followed you."

"The last few days I followed him here every night. It was hard to get close enough to see what he was up to. But last night I saw him go into the root cellar. So tonight I came prepared with a bunch of keys."

"Are you a cop or a narc or something?"

"No, I'm not a cop. My kid brother was killed eight months ago. He ran out in the middle of the Staten Island Expressway and was hit by a car and killed instantly. He was so high on drugs he didn't know what he was doing."

Allie said nothing. She knew what he was feeling. She also knew that words didn't help the pain.

"Someone in this community supplied my thirteen-year-old brother with drugs. Enough drugs to keep him hooked and loaded half the time. I was away at school and didn't know. After he died, I moved home. I vowed

to find the guy who killed my brother. Because in my book, it was murder.'' He slammed his fist into his hand.

''How did you catch on to Bob Meer?''

''It took a while. The only connection I had was the playground where my brother hung out. So I got the job as activities director there. I got close to the kids. I listened. I watched. It didn't take long to spot the regular drug users. The kids were really closemouthed—almost like they were scared to talk. So I followed the obvious users. They led me right to Bob Meer and—''

A key turned in the padlock.

Mad Dog stumbled to his feet.

Bob Meer entered their dungeon. Still holding the gun, he looked smug and arrogant.

''Back off, Madison.'' He waved the gun. ''Sit down against the wall.'' Mad Dog obeyed.

Allie watched as Meer flicked on a lantern and set it on the floor. It cast eerie shadows. Meer drew a syringe from his jacket pocket.

''What are you doing?'' She got to her knees.

''He'll feel a little prick. Nothing more.''

''How will you explain three bodies, Meer?'' Mad Dog asked.

''No problem. You shot the girl and her mother. They found out about your nasty drug operation. So you had to eliminate them. To celebrate, you got so high you passed out in a drug stupor. Never even heard the bulldozers. And the gun will be in your hand.''

''You're insane.'' Mad Dog pointed at Meer.

''Let my daughter go,'' Allie's mother cried. ''Kill me, but let her go.''

''Shut up! All of you.'' Meer walked to Allie, but kept the gun aimed at Mad Dog. With a lunge he

grabbed Allie up and pressed the gun to the back of her neck.

She didn't dare breathe.

"One move out of you, Madison, and the girl dies right now."

She could feel the tension in Mad Dog. His back didn't touch the wall. His hands pressed against the floor like he was ready to spring. Allie prayed he could do it.

"You." He rammed the gun harder into Allie's neck. Cold steel. "Walk slowly over to Madison. I'll shoot you now if you try anything funny."

She moved like someone in a dream, one foot in front of the other.

"Sit down facing the wall." The gun rammed her neck. She did. He kept the gun on her neck. Allie rolled her eyes to her right, hoping Mad Dog would understand. He frowned and shook his head ever so slightly.

Allie glared at him. It was their only chance.

"Stretch out your arm, Madison. Slowly."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Meer, with his free hand, pull the plunger back on the syringe.

Allie signaled with her eyes again. She jerked sideways. Mad Dog sprang. The gun went off. Meer swore.

She rolled to her mother. Mad Dog and Meer thrashed in a tight clinch on the floor. With a lunge, Meer pinned Mad Dog under him. Allie ran to the lantern. She held it aloft and slammed it down on the back of Meer's head. He yelled in surprise. His head flopped forward.

She hit him again. And again. Sobbing, she dropped to her knees and kept banging the lantern on Meer's head.

"Enough!" Mad Dog grabbed her arm.

"Allie!" Her father's voice.

Someone pulled her back. "Stop it!" Shane's voice. "The police are here. Your father called them."

Allie slumped against Shane, who knelt beside her. "I found my mother. I found her."

Twenty-one

"Are you sure your mother's okay?" Mrs. Brumbaugh placed stacks of steaming pancakes in front of Allie and Shane at her kitchen table early Saturday evening. Outside, rain beat against the windows with a pleasant pattering.

"The doctor said she'll be fine once she gets the drugs out of her system." Allie poured a puddle of syrup on her pancakes. "But she'll have to stay in the hospital awhile. She slept most of the day."

"Except when she chewed you out for taking all those risks." Shane grinned, then shoved a forkful of pancakes into his mouth.

Allie made a face at him. "I wanted to stay longer, but my dad sent me home to rest. He's going to sit with her all night."

"That's good." Mrs. Brumbaugh nodded.

"Yeah." Allie knocked on the kitchen table for good luck. "I know things won't be perfect right away, but I think we can work it out and be a family again."

"I still can't believe that awful man would have left

you and your mother to die under that barn.'' Mrs. Brumbaugh lifted her hands in disbelief.

''We would have died, if my dad hadn't gone into my room during the night because he thought he heard me having a nightmare,'' Allie said.

''Your father sounded scared to death when he called me at one in the morning to ask where you could possibly be.'' Mrs. B. sighed. ''Imagine how I felt telling him you might be with Shane looking for your mother!''

''When he called me, he was spitting smoke!'' Shane waved his fork. ''He threatened to sic the police on me if I didn't tell him where you were. He didn't believe me when I said I didn't know.''

''So how did he know where to look?'' Mrs. B. wiped her hands on her apron.

''I told him that, knowing Allie, she might have gone back to the Vandermeer estate.''

''I bet he thought you were crazy.'' Allie laughed.

''He did. So did my parents when I left to go help your father find you.'' He pointed the fork at her. ''You got me in a lot of hot water.''

She locked her fork in combat with his. ''Want to fight about it?''

''It's a good thing your father called the police,'' Mrs. B. said.

Shane laughed. ''Otherwise Allie might have killed Bob Meer on the spot. She was beating up on him like she was Mike Tyson.''

Allie clenched her fists. ''After what he did to my mother and brother I wanted to kill him!''

''Did he admit running Jimmy over?'' Mrs. B. set another stack of pancakes on the table.

''Not yet. But he will.'' Allie nodded. ''Once we get all the proof together, he'll confess.''

Allie looked at Shane. ''What's the matter? You look skeptical.''

''It was just something Mad Dog said at the hospital.''

''What?'' She poured another glass of milk.

''You were with your mother. Mad Dog and I were waiting to be questioned by the police. Mad Dog kept shaking his head. He said, 'I could have sworn Meer was genuinely upset when Jimmy McKenzie was killed.' ''

''Did he confess selling drugs to the kids?'' Mrs. B. turned off the stove and sat down.

''My dad said he did,'' Allie replied. ''Meer insisted that was his only crime—that he never killed Jimmy and he never intended to kill my mother.''

''I think he's trying to weasel out of a murder charge by admitting to the lesser rap of dealing drugs.'' Shane sounded disgusted.

''He couldn't very well deny it when a couple of kids came forward and confessed that Meer gave them drugs.'' Allie reached for another pancake.

''Mad Dog said that Meer was a sponsor for kids who were in drug rehab programs,'' Shane explained. ''The kids could call him anytime when they felt like they craved drugs. He was supposed to help them. Instead, he gave them drugs. He told them to bring their friends around so he could get them hooked, too.''

''The kids said they were afraid he'd kill them if they told on him.'' Allie shook her head.

''I hope they put him in prison forever!'' Mrs. Brumbaugh clasped her hands.

"Did you hear they found Allie's mother's car?" Shane asked.

"Where?"

"In one of the garages on the Vandermeer estate."

"Good. One more piece of evidence against that terrible man," Mrs. B. said.

Allie dropped her fork. It clattered to the table.

"What's the matter?" Shane stared at her.

She closed her eyes and tried to pinpoint the elusive thought that had disturbed her. "It doesn't make sense."

"What are you talking about?" Shane asked.

"Last night when I went to the playground and spied on Bob Meer, he was talking to someone in the office. Someone who had to have known that my mother was in the root cellar, because Meer said that the wrecking crew would get rid of the evidence for them."

"What are you getting at?" Shane wiped up syrup with the last bit of pancake.

"At the time I thought it was Mad Dog he was talking to. But if Mad Dog is innocent, who was it?"

"Are you sure you heard him right?" Shane washed down his pancake with milk.

"I know I heard him say 'this time we'll do it my way. The wrecking crew will do the job for us.' We know now that he meant killing my mother."

"If it wasn't Mad Dog, who could it be?" Mrs. Brumbaugh asked, her eyes wide.

Allie held her hands up, then dropped them. "Unless . . . no . . . that couldn't be."

"What?" Shane asked.

"What if Mad Dog's lying? What if he's trying to pin everything on Meer?"

"What about his brother killed while on drugs?" Shane frowned.

"What if that's a lie, too?" Allie rubbed her temples. "I'm too tired to think straight right now."

Mrs. Brumbaugh began clearing the dishes. "Your father's right, Allie. You need some rest. I've made up my spare room for you. Would you like a nice hot bath?"

She rubbed her sore shoulders. "Yeah. A long hot shower. I need to go home and get clean clothes first, Mrs. B."

"I'll walk you over." Shane jumped up.

"Don't be long. I'll put fresh towels in the bathroom." Mrs. B. walked them to the door.

The rain fell in a heavy torrent. Thunder rumbled in the distance. They ran with their hands over their heads to Allie's house. The streetlights were already on.

She found the key they kept under the rosebush by their front porch. "You want to come in?" She unlocked the front door.

"I better not. My parents are waiting for me."

"Will I see you tomorrow?" She hoped she didn't sound too pushy.

Shane grinned. "Try and keep me away."

They looked into each other's eyes. Shane's blue ones brought goose bumps to her skin.

Then he bent his head and kissed her. Allie wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned toward him. He held her face with his hands. They felt warm and strong. Then he kissed her again, long and hard. His hands slipped down her back. This time the kiss lasted forever. Allie thought she might die on the spot.

Shane pulled away. "I'd better go. I love you, Allie." He ran down the steps into the darkness.

She almost fell into the house. She leaned against the door. Her legs felt like rubber. "Wow!" she exhaled. Then she danced around the living room, flipping on the lights. If she had wings she would fly.

She took the stairs two at a time and waltzed into her bedroom. She started laughing. She sounded just like her mother when she used to sing and dance around the house.

She stopped laughing. That was before Jimmy died.

Then she smiled. Now they had another point of reference. Now they could say "Before Mom was kidnapped" or "Before Allie found Mom" or "Before Mom and Dad got back together."

She hugged her arms tight across her chest. Things would be different now. They could look back on something other than Jimmy's death. They could focus on when her mother was missing and was found again. A new beginning.

"Can you hear me, Jimmy?" she whispered into the silence of her room. "It's okay now. You can rest. We found the person who killed you. You didn't die for nothing."

The telephone shrilled. She ran to the hallway to answer it. It was probably Mrs. B., wondering what was taking so long.

"Hello," she sang into the phone.

"Allie?" The raspy voice of a boy, sounding scared. For one awful second she thought it was Jimmy. Her euphoria vanished with a thud.

"Yes?"

"Are you alone?"

"Why? Who is this?"

"Get out of there quick. He's coming to kill you."

Her heart jumped in her chest. "Who? Is this Jason Densmore? It sounds like Jason."

"Look, I'm warning you. He'll kill you just like he killed your brother."

"Is this your idea of a sick joke?"

"You've got to believe me!" His voice rose to a whine. "He's going to kill you. Call the police." The line went dead.

Allie stared at the receiver in her hand. She dropped it back on the cradle like it might bite her.

Suddenly the house seemed too quiet, the hallway too shadowy. Slowly, she turned to the stairway.

"Hello, Allie." He stood at the bottom. He climbed toward her one step at a time.

She pressed her hands on her mouth.

"Don't be scared. I've come for the flashlight."

"Don't . . ." she whimpered.

"Was that Jason?" He smiled a horrible smile on his handsome face.

Allie shook her head.

"You're lying, Allie. He guessed I would come here. I saw it on his face. Next time I'll have to beat him up better. My little stepbrother needs to be taught a lesson."

Tim Callahan's white leather tennis shoe reached the top step.

Allie charged. She shoved his chest. He stumbled and fell to his knees. She raced through the door of her bedroom and slammed it shut.

She pushed open the window and leaped through onto the roof.

Tim Callahan banged into the room.

The rain made the roof a slippery torture. She clung to the house. Her breaths came in great gasps. Her feet slid like ice skates.

Tim made a horrible racket behind her. She lowered one foot to the trellis. His hand grazed her shoulder.

She climbed like she'd never climbed before. Halfway down her feet flew off the rung. She dangled like a limp puppet.

Tim's shoe crushed her fingers. The pain gave her strength. Her foot found the rung. She pressed down and dropped to the driveway. Pain shot through her ankle.

A great tearing noise jerked her head up. The trellis tore away from the house. It came rushing at her with Tim clinging to it, screaming at the top of his lungs.

She rolled to the side. The trellis brushed her arm. Tim crashed to the cement on his back. The sound of his head banging the concrete ripped through her.

She lay where she'd rolled, the only sound the heaving of her ragged breathing.

The trellis rose. Tim Callahan sat up. Allie could not move. He threw the trellis off him like it was a twig. "Say your prayers, kid." He struggled to his feet.

"No, you don't, Callahan." Out of the darkness, two figures grabbed Tim from behind.

"You okay, Allie?"

Shane and Mad Dog Madison.

Mrs. Brumbaugh rushed to Allie. She helped her sit up. "The police will be here soon."

Someone else came charging down the sidewalk. He stopped when he saw Shane and Mad Dog holding Callahan. Jason Densmore confronted his stepbrother.

"I'm sorry, Tim. I couldn't let you kill anyone else."

"Shut up, you stupid idiot!" Callahan lunged. But Mad Dog and Shane held him fast.

Jason turned to Allie. "I didn't know for sure, but I suspected that Tim ran your brother down. When I asked him, he said he'd kill *me* if I ever told."

"Why?" Tears streamed down her face. "Why did you do it?"

"*Why?*" Callahan threw back his head. "I couldn't let a nosy brat like your brother ruin a thousand-dollar-a-week income. Could I?"

Allie's brain spun. It wasn't making sense.

Mad Dog explained it. "Callahan, here, was Meer's middleman. Meer supplied the drugs. Callahan sold them. Oh, it was small-scale stuff compared to most drug operations, but enough to set him up for life. Callahan sold the drugs to the kids—at the high school, the playground, wherever he could. How do you think he paid for that fancy car?"

"I had a good thing going." Callahan sneered. "Then your mother came snooping around. I wanted to kill her on the spot. But after I iced your brother, Meer made me promise I wouldn't kill anyone else."

"Why did you go after Allie?" Mad Dog asked. "She didn't know you were involved."

"She found the flashlight I dropped in her house."

"Why were you in my mother's bedroom?" Allie rubbed her ankle.

"After we locked her in the root cellar, I had to make sure she hadn't left anything behind that might point to us." Callahan snorted. "You thought you were so smart mentioning the flashlight to Meer. I knew then I had to kill you."

"Because of the flashlight?" Allie asked.

"You spoiled everything. You fingered Meer. I couldn't let you get away with that. And when Meer was in the slammer, he couldn't tell me what to do anymore." Callahan started laughing.

"Shut up, Callahan." Mad Dog twisted his arm.

"How did you all get here?" Allie looked from one to the other.

"I felt there was a piece missing," Mad Dog explained. "I didn't think Meer was in it alone. And for some reason I couldn't get it out of my mind that you were in danger. You're feisty and nosy."

Shane grinned.

"Thanks." Allie made a face.

Mad Dog laughed. "If I were the killer, I'd have come after you too. You spelled trouble with a capital *T*. If he was going to come after you, I knew it would be soon. It was just a matter of time before Meer fingered the other guy. So I decided to watch you."

"I thought you went home, Shane," Allie said.

"I ran into Mad Dog on the way. He told me he thought you might be in danger, so I came back with him—just in time, too. I couldn't believe it when I saw Tim chasing you on the roof."

"I guess everyone knew but me." She looked at Mrs. Brumbaugh. "How'd you get here?"

Mrs. B. sighed before she answered. "I felt so responsible for not telling your father what you were up to that I watched from my window the minute you left the house. I was afraid to let you out of my sight.

"I saw you say good night to Shane and go in the house." Mrs. B. coughed to cover her embarrassment. "It seemed like you were in there such a long time. Then I saw him." She pointed dramatically at Tim.

"Where?" Allie asked.

"In the living room. I can see into your living room from my kitchen window. At first I thought it was Shane who had come back. Then I realized he was creeping around like someone up to no good. When he started for the stairs, I ran for the telephone and called the police. By the time I was on my way over to help you, I heard him scream and the trellis break."

Allie got all choked up.

"You okay?" Mrs. B. asked.

"You bet. You know how great it feels to have such terrific friends? I would never have found my mother without you guys."

Screaming sirens and flashing red lights tore down the street. Three police cars jolted to a stop in front of Allie's house.

While everyone talked at once, and the cops put Tim Callahan in handcuffs, Allie slipped over to Shane who slid his arm around her waist.

Was it only a week ago her mother had disappeared? Never had Allie felt so alone as then. But things were different now. She found out she was strong enough to face her problem alone, just like Dr. Diamond had said.

Shane's arm tightened around her. And she'd gotten back with Shane. Found a new friend in Mrs. B. Made peace with her father . . . and with Jimmy.

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Risky Business

Allie McKenzie's mother is missing. The police have been called and an investigation is under way, but everyone seems to think Mrs. McKenzie ran away. Five months ago, Allie's brother was killed by a hit-and-run driver and her mother is grieving, yet Allie is sure her mother wouldn't just leave her—for any reason. Something is wrong—very wrong. And if the police won't get to the bottom of it, and her father won't do anything, Allie will.

But when Allie starts snooping around, she finds out more than she ever bargained for. And if she's not careful, she might be the next person who winds up missing…or dead.

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